

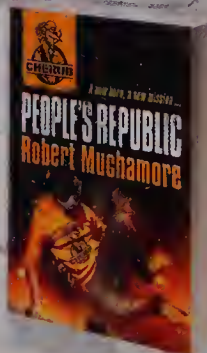
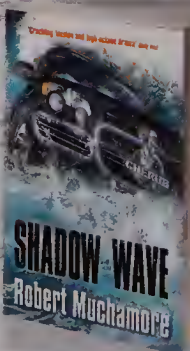
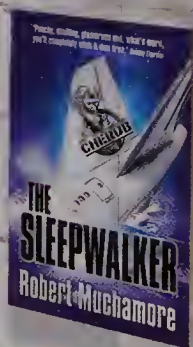
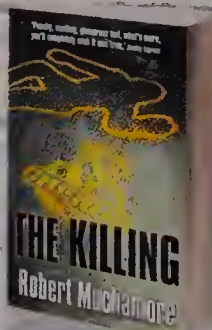
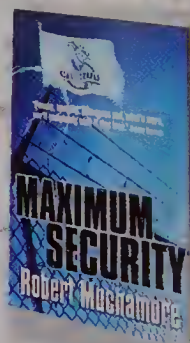
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DARK SUN

Robert Muchamore

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DARK SUN

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Robert Muchamore



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WHAT IS CHERUB?

CHERUB is a branch of British Intelligence. Its agents are aged between ten and seventeen years. Cherubs are mainly orphans who have been taken out of care homes and trained to work undercover. They live on CHERUB campus, a secret facility hidden in the English countryside.

WHAT USE ARE KIDS?

Quite a lot. Nobody realises kids do undercover missions, which means they can get away with all kinds of stuff that adults can't.

WHO ARE THEY?

About three hundred children live on CHERUB campus. Among the agents are fifteen-year-old JAMES ADAMS and his twelve-year-old sister LAUREN. Their friends include BRUCE NORRIS, ANDY LAGAN and Lauren's on-off boyfriend 'RAT' RATHBONE.

CHERUB T-SHIRTS

Cherubs are ranked according to the colour of the T-shirts they wear on campus. ORANGE is for visitors. RED is for kids who live on CHERUB campus but are too young to qualify as agents (the minimum age is ten). BLUE is for kids undergoing CHERUB'S tough one-hundred-day basic training regime. A GREY T-shirt means you're qualified for missions. NAVY is a reward for outstanding performance on a single mission. The BLACK T-shirt is the ultimate recognition for outstanding achievement over a number of missions.

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Dark Sun

Rat and Andy star in a mission that
nearly goes nuclear . . .

1. RANCID

July 2007

Honeywill Community School was a dump, but it was the last day before summer holidays so at least everyone was happy. Teachers who hadn't cracked a smile since September let classes play Nintendo in the sun, the headmaster was bounding around in sunglasses and tennis shorts. Kids even took beatings with good grace, knowing their next appointment with the bullies wouldn't be for at least six weeks.

All the displays had been torn off the walls in Greg's second-floor form room. He stood on a chair, leaning out of the classroom window with his school tie fixed around his head like a bandana and all his shirt buttons undone. Lunchtime was in full flow on the concrete playground below: girls chatting in huddles, boys playing football and a massive queue at the water fountain because it was the

hottest day of the year so far.

'Smell that,' Zhang said, as the overweight Chinese boy thrust a clear plastic tub up towards Greg's nostrils.

The stench hit Greg like a fist. He recoiled violently, jumping off the chair and almost sprawling out as he backed into a metal paper basket.

'You *know* it's bad!' Zhang grinned, swinging the pot back towards Greg's nose.

'Get off!' Greg shouted, coughing and retching as he scrambled away between desks. 'Is that your mum's cooking?'

Zhang shook his head as he placed the lid back on the tub. 'It's coleslaw from the school canteen. Says use by November fourteenth, but I just found it at the back of my locker.'

The third boy in the classroom was a skinny lad called George and he was cracking up laughing.

'Shut your mouth, stick boy,' Greg shouted. 'Unless you want me to rub your face in it.'

But now that the lid was safely back on the coleslaw, Greg saw the funny side himself and he smiled even more when he saw the mound of junk Zhang had cleared out of his locker: text books covered in mud where Zhang had dumped his football boots on top of them, food wrappers, dirty tissues and a bottle of correction fluid that had leaked over his exercise books and dried into a hard white lump.

'Animal,' Greg snorted. 'Is that a locker or a TARDIS? I don't even know how all that junk fitted in there.'

Zhang's bulky frame swaggered across the room towards his two mates. 'Greg, your locker's neat because you've only been at this school for half a term.'

George shook his head. 'No Zhang, his locker's neat because he's not a revolting fat slob.'

Zhang didn't like being called fat and stepped up to George to face him off. 'You want a slap?'

The pair had been best mates since nursery school, but that didn't mean Zhang wouldn't get physical if George mouthed off.

Greg tried to prick the tension. 'You're such a pair of tarts,' he sneered. 'Go on, snog and make up like you always do.'

Zhang took a step back before turning around and staring Greg out, but he wouldn't have dared do anything: Greg was only average height for a Year Eight, but he was sturdy and biceps bulged under his rolled-up shirt sleeves.

'Oh Greg, I forgot,' George said, as he scooped the last of the junk in his locker into the open mouth of his backpack. 'I'm getting dragged to some barbecue at my aunt's house on Saturday, Zhang's flying off to China on Sunday – so if we're gonna have the X-box sleepover, I'm afraid it's tonight or not at all.'

'Oh,' Greg said awkwardly, running his hand through a tangle of dark hair.

'You can still come, right?' George asked.

Greg shrugged, pulling a little Nokia out of his pocket. 'Sure, I guess. I mean . . . I'll just text my dad to make sure,

but there's nothing else going on, so I can't see why not.'

'Cool,' George said, slamming the door of his locker before wiping his brow on his sleeve.

'I take it my cousin Andy can still come?' Greg asked. 'I know you've never met him, but he's the biggest laugh, I swear.'

'More the merrier, I say,' George answered, before making a big huffing sound. 'I don't mind the sun, but it's just too hot today!'

Greg laughed. 'This is nothing. When I lived in Australia you'd get days like this in *winter*.'

Zhang tried to copy Greg's Australian accent. 'When I lived in Auuuuuustralia it was four hundred degrees in the shade. It was so hot the koala bears dropped out of the trees ready-cooked.'

'Don't mock the accent,' Greg smirked. 'It drives the chicks wild.'

'No accounting for female tastes,' Zhang said. 'The meat-heads they go out with . . .'

'Just because Amy blew you out twice,' George grinned, as he strolled towards the window.

'Oh and you're *such* a stud,' Zhang replied.

George stood on the chair by the window and leaned out to cool off in the breeze. He heard a distinctive laugh in the playground below and looked straight down.

George turned back inside. 'Zhang!' he yelled eagerly. 'Gimme that coleslaw. My sister's standing *right* under this window.'

Greg and Zhang rushed over, dragging chairs behind them.

'Nice,' Zhang grinned, as the three boys leaned out and stared down into the sunny playground. 'Your sister's so fit.'

'Eww,' George shuddered. 'You wouldn't fancy her if you'd seen her in the bath, shaving her hairy-arsed legs.'

'Face facts,' Greg said, shaking his head. 'If Sophie was anything other than your fifteen-year-old sister you'd be perving at her the same as everyone else.'

'It's personality that counts,' George noted. 'And she's a grade-one pain in the buttohole.'

'You know what I don't get?' Greg said, looking across at Zhang. 'How does George, with his Twiglet arms and legs, get to have a *total* babe for a sister?'

'Shut up,' George ordered.

Greg and Zhang did shut up. Not because George had told them, but because he'd popped the lid off Zhang's tub of eight-month-old coleslaw.

'That's so rank,' Greg moaned.

'It's bubbling,' George said, trying not to breathe. 'The tub is actually warm!'

'Lob it then,' Zhang said impatiently. 'What are you waiting for?'

Greg looked across and saw doubt all over George's face.

'Do it,' Zhang urged. 'Remember: Sophie lent her ex-boyfriend half your PSP games and you never got 'em back.'

George shook his head and moved to put the lid back

on the pot. 'Better not. If my old lady found out she'd make a misery of my whole summer holidays.'

'You chicken!' Zhang tutted. 'I *knew* you'd bottle it.'

As George lined up the lid to pop it back on, Zhang reached over and batted his arm. The coleslaw shot up out of George's hand. He tried catching it but the pot glanced off his fingertips and headed for the ground.

Greg looked down and got a surprise: Sophie and her gaggle of mates had scattered to avoid a football rifling across from the adjacent Astro turf.

'Watch where you're kicking that, you knob!' Sophie shouted.

George, Zhang and Greg watched open mouthed as a bare-chested Year-Ten boy charged in to grab the football. The tension made it feel like slow motion: Sophie and her friends moving away, the coleslaw pot spinning in the air and the beefy Year Ten running in to retrieve the ball.

'Zhang you *idiot*!' George gasped.

The tub of rancid coleslaw hit the Year Ten's neck as he scooped the football off the concrete. The brown mass erupted, spattering down his bare back and up as far as the top of his shaven head.

Upstairs, the three boys dived away from the window, but in his haste George forgot to duck and whacked the back of his head on the frame.

'You moron!' George shouted to Zhang, as he jumped down off the chair. 'That was Thomas Moran. If he finds us we're dead.'

'Who's Thomas Moran when he's out shopping?' Greg asked.

George anxiously rubbed the bump on the back of his head. 'Just one of the hardest kids in Year Ten, that's all. Him and his mates are all rugby players. *Big* rugby players.'

'Maybe they didn't see us,' Greg suggested. 'They might not even know what window it was thrown from.'

Zhang crept up to the window and peeked out. 'They saw us!' he gasped, before ducking back down. 'Sophie and all her mates are pointing up. Moran and another big dude are sprinting towards the main entrance.'

George was waving his bandy arms around, working himself into a complete state. 'Why did you hit my arm you idiot? Those guys aren't gonna take prisoners. If they catch us, they'll kick our heads in.'

Greg swept his backpack off his desk and headed for the door. 'Less panic, more running,' he suggested.

'This is so bad,' George shuddered.

As Zhang belted outside into the corridor Greg grabbed George by his collar and yanked him towards the door.

'Calm down, you'll be OK,' Greg said. 'But we've got to start running, *now*.'

By the time George and Greg got out into the hallway, Zhang had already made it to the main staircase, thirty metres away. He'd hoped to get down to the first floor and hide out in a classroom there, but he had no chance because the two big Year Tens were already bounding up from the ground floor.

‘There’s the fat one!’ Thomas Moran shouted. ‘You wait till I get my hands on you.’

Zhang’s shoes squealed on the corridor tiles as he saw Greg and George belting out of the classroom in the opposite direction.

‘Guys,’ Zhang yelled desperately, running as fast his chunky legs would allow. ‘Guys, wait up!’

2. LAKE

The British countryside is dotted with secret government installations: nuclear research facilities, weapons dumps, communications monitoring centres. CHERUB campus was in the highest security category, surrounded by government-owned forest and marked on maps as an artillery firing range.

Anyone ignoring the warning signs and driving up the approach road towards campus' solid black gates would be greeted by guards armed with Heckler and Koch machine guns. You couldn't even view campus from the air because the sky overhead formed part of the protected airspace around a military airbase five kilometres to the east.

If you *had* been allowed to overfly CHERUB campus you'd have seen a set of buildings similar to those you'd find at a wealthy boarding school, surrounded by sports pitches and outdoor tennis courts. More unusual were a

banana-shaped building bristling with satellite dishes, four helipads and beyond a large oval lake a wooded area, containing an assault course and an outdoor shooting range.

The weather was glorious and more than half the kids on CHERUB campus had taken their lunch outside to eat by the lake. Some kids cooled off with a paddle, but swimming was presently banned because it might disturb the family of ducklings living on a muddy embankment near the lake's centre.

Twelve-year-old Lauren Adams lay on the lawn near the lake's edge, toes curled in the grass, surrounded by daisies and using her arm to keep the sun out of her eyes. She'd managed to get her favourite sushi box from the canteen before they ran out and the sun made her whole body feel wonderfully warm, but she was still depressed because she was in trouble and it wasn't her fault.

A fair-skinned boy called Andy Lagan sat on the grass next to Lauren. He put his Manga down and tapped her arm. 'Zara's here,' he said grimly. 'Better start putting your boots on.'

Lauren wanted time to freeze so she could stay on the warm grass for ever. 'God,' she moaned, sweeping blades of grass off her soles as she sat up.

All cherubs wore a military style uniform during school hours: a T-shirt with CHERUB logo – the colour of which depended upon your rank – olive combat trousers with zip-off legs and lightweight black boots. As Andy pulled his

grey T-shirt over his chest and started moving uphill, Lauren hurriedly pulled balled-up socks out of her boots.

‘You’d better shift,’ Andy shouted back at her. ‘Zara’s gonna be in a right mood.’

Zara Asker stood on a tarmac path fifty metres uphill. She had one hand on her hip and leaned on one of the electric carts that staff used to move around campus. Zara was thirty-seven years old; she wore a flower-print dress and still carried some of the weight from the birth of her second child a year earlier.

Belying her mumsy appearance, Zara held one of the most senior jobs in British Intelligence. As the chairwoman of CHERUB, she was a headteacher and a spymaster rolled into one. Zara was usually popular with the kids in her charge, except when it was time to dish out punishments.

Lauren rushed to join Andy and six other CHERUB agents up on the path, with her boot laces dragging behind her. There was a boy and girl in their early teens, but the main clump comprised four grey-shirt boys aged ten and eleven. They were all mates and their unelected leader was the spiky-haired Jake Parker.

‘Right you lot, line up,’ Zara said stiffly, before eyeballing Jake’s soggy trousers and ketchup-stained shirt. ‘Is *that* how you present yourself to the chairwoman?’

Lauren couldn’t stand Jake and enjoyed his discomfort as he hurriedly tucked in his shirt. ‘Sorry, Miss,’ Jake said meekly. ‘I dropped my hot dog.’

Zara zoomed in and inspected the stain. ‘Make sure you

soak the shirt in detergent before you take it down to the laundry.'

'Yes, Miss,' Jake nodded. Zara could be a bit random when she dished out punishments and the eleven-year-old was relieved to have received nothing more than laundry advice.

But the chairwoman hadn't finished with them yet. 'Before I start, have any of you got anything you want to say?' Zara asked.

The eight uniformed agents looked sheepish and tried to avoid catching the chairwoman's gaze. Lauren wanted to say that it was Jake and his three mates who'd caused all the trouble, but she was smart enough to know that it would only make things worse: Jake would throw the accusation right back at her and it would descend into a slanging match that would make Zara even madder.

Zara adjusted the strap of her summer dress and gave a deep sigh. 'You eight are all qualified CHERUB agents,' she said. 'From black shirts like Lauren to some of you younger boys who are still awaiting your first mission. But no kid gets inside CHERUB campus unless you're from the brightest two or three per cent of the population. Then we put you through the wringer: language training, espionage training, combat training and physical training. In other words, the eight of you are amongst the most outstandingly capable people of your age anywhere in the world. And that's why I'm so disgusted by what happened this morning.'

Zara reached inside the electric buggy and retrieved a

crumpled paper aeroplane from the passenger seat. It was made from a giant sheet of cartridge paper. It had *I'm So Bored Airlines* written along the side and a crudely drawn penis on the tail.

'This was just one of eleven paper darts I found in that classroom. Along with hundreds of paper balls, boot-prints all over the tabletops and damage to a Venetian blind where some idiot appears to have tried to swing off it.'

Lauren struggled not to smile: one of the few high points of her morning had been watching Jake trying to recover a paper aeroplane stuck up high between the blind slats, only to crash off the tabletop and bang his head on the window ledge while desperately grabbing at the blind to save himself.

Zara continued, 'What makes this worse is that you behaved like this in front of a guest speaker. I *know* it's hard to concentrate when it's as hot as today, and perhaps a ninety-minute lecture on preserving DNA evidence isn't particularly exciting. But Mr Donaldson travelled all the way up from MI5 headquarters in London to speak with you and I assumed you were all mature enough to behave yourselves without a staff member looking over your shoulder.'

Andy raised his hand tentatively. 'Miss, not all of us were involved.'

Zara's eyes bulged. 'I saw the size of the boot-prints on the desktops, Andy. Mr Donaldson made it clear that the four younger boys were primarily responsible, but none of you four older kids intervened. Even if you didn't think

you could control the situation yourselves, you could have walked down the hall to another classroom and brought the situation to the attention of a staff member. You're trained CHERUB agents. How can you expect to be sent out on missions to fight terrorists and drug dealers when you haven't even got the brainpower to deal with a couple of lads getting out of hand during a lecture?"

Lauren was irritated by these comments. Zara had once been a CHERUB agent herself, but she'd clearly forgotten the unwritten rule that cherubs didn't grass each other up.

'You're all getting identical punishments,' Zara announced. 'Seven pounds fifty pocket money deducted to pay for the damaged blind and you're going to be spending the rest of this sunny afternoon doing physical training on the assault course with Miss Speaks.'

The eight cherubs groaned, but only Jake was dumb enough to mouth off.

'That's bull,' he yelled. 'When was the last time people had to run the assault course just for messing in class? Laps of the athletic track maybe . . .'

Zara swooped down so that she was looking Jake straight in the eye. 'You mucked around in front of a campus guest, causing me personal embarrassment. Outside lecturers are a vital part of your ongoing training and they won't want to come here if you behave like that, will they?'

'No, Miss,' Jake said, adopting a surly *if you say so* voice.

'I don't like your tone, Jake Parker,' Zara said, now getting really angry. 'Seeing as you're so keen on punishment

laps, you can also run twenty a day for the next week. Your smart mouth also just cost you an extra month's pocket money and got you grounded in your room for the next two weekends.'

Jake's head shrivelled between his shoulders. Lauren enjoyed seeing him suffer: it seemed like the least Jake deserved after costing her seven fifty and an afternoon of gruelling training on the assault course.

'Miss Speaks is waiting,' Zara shouted, pointing dramatically towards the wooded area beyond the lake. 'All of you start running to the training compound before I *really* lose my temper.'

3. MOVES

'Move it,' Greg shouted, grabbing George by his collar.

'I can't,' George gasped. 'Got a stitch.'

They'd run down the long second-floor corridor and on to the back stairs, which were off limits to pupils unless there was a fire drill. Zhang was overweight and kept falling further behind, while the two Year Tens closed relentlessly.

Greg gave George another pull, tugging him off the landing. 'Through the sixth-form block and we'll be in the canteen,' Greg explained. 'They won't be able to touch us in there: it's full of teachers.'

The sense of hope gave George some energy and he leaned over the banister and started moving down as quickly as he could.

'You're so unfit,' Greg moaned. 'You should take up jogging or something.'

Zhang had caught up by the time they'd reached the

bottom of the staircase, but Thomas Moran and his mate Johnno were now just a single flight of stairs behind them.

Greg turned left towards the sixth-form annexe, but he was horrified to find the doors locked. Through the safety glass he saw the soft chairs and furniture all piled up and white sheets spread over the carpet tiles. A sign on the door spelled their doom:

The sixth-form block is getting a lick of paint!

Reopens September 2007

Have a great summer!!!!

‘Dammit,’ Greg shouted.

‘We’re puppy food,’ George gasped.

Out of options, Zhang led the trio back towards the staircase. Thomas Moran had reached the bottom, but Zhang used his bulk to plough through and start running down the short corridor that led to the sports hall.

The floor was covered with dried-out mud trailed in from the playing fields and the air smelled like BO. The corridor ended at a T-junction, with double doors leading into the gymnasium directly ahead, a pink corridor leading left to the girls’ changing room and a blue one going towards the boys’.

The gym was always locked at lunchtime and Zhang shoulder-charging the doors made no difference to that. The smell grew even worse as they reached the boys’ changing rooms. The air was steamy and rogue pieces of kit

scattered the puddled floor. There was a communal shower at one end and a putrid-smelling toilet block at the other.

Greg and George ran in and headed towards the showers. They'd been in here a hundred times before but they glanced around, hoping against hope that there was a fire door or some other exit they'd never noticed before.

'Dead end, boys,' Thomas Moran whooped, smashing his huge fist into his palm as Zhang slammed the door of a toilet cubicle and bolted himself in.

'Be reasonable,' George begged, holding out his hands as he backed up to the showers with Greg. 'It was meant for my sister. If you let me off I'll pay you twenty pounds, first day of next term. I swear on my life.'

At the opposite end of the room, Johnno's size-ten Nike blasted the cubicle door, not only breaking the lock, but ripping off the hinges on the opposite side too. Zhang howled with pain as the door crashed down on his head.

'Heeeeeere's Johnno!' Johnno grinned, throwing the door out of the cubicle before laying into Zhang with hard punches. 'Guess where I'm gonna stick your head!'

As Zhang screamed for mercy, Greg pushed George back towards the showers and faced off Thomas Moran. Greg was tough looking, but one of the youngest in his year and only just about to turn thirteen. Thomas was bigger in every direction and his cropped hair and the sweat streaking down his muscular torso made him look fearsome.

'You're a cool guy,' Thomas sneered. 'Why you hanging out with a fat freak and a skinny freak anyway?'

'I don't want any trouble,' Greg said diplomatically. 'But I'm warning you, my dad's a kickboxing instructor. I know how to handle myself.'

Thomas laughed so hard that he showered Greg with spit. 'Bring it on, titch. Show us your moves!'

In the background Zhang screamed out as Johno dunked his face into the toilet bowl and pulled the flush.

Thomas turned back and saw Zhang on his knees, with Johno's whole weight pressing down on his back.

'Nice one, Johno,' Thomas jeered. 'I reckon these two could do with a hair wash as well.'

Greg twisted back around his left shoulder and pulled his hand up tight above his wrist. As Thomas turned back Greg thrust upwards, smashing the palm of his hand against Thomas' temple.

Thomas Moran's neck snapped around so fast that his eyeballs didn't have time to follow. George recoiled in horror as he watched Thomas crash backwards into the changing-room wall with nothing but pure white in his eyeballs. Unconscious, the beefy Year Ten slid down the wall at a weird angle, ending up with his legs splayed out and his torso lying across the changing bench.

'Jesus!' George gasped. 'What have you done?'

Greg didn't answer because he'd stepped over Thomas' legs and headed confidently past the rows of hooks and into the toilet block. It was a nasty space: mud and piss all over the floor, broken sinks and a smell you didn't even want to think about.

It would have been difficult for Greg to pull Johnno out of the cubicle. Luckily, Johnno turned to see his pal Thomas slumped on the floor and charged forwards with both fists swinging. Greg ducked, then bobbed up and drove a punch hard into Johnno's nose.

Caught off guard, Johnno stumbled back as Greg launched a devastating assault. His blows hit all the weak spots: a dig in the ribs, two knees in the kidneys and a final chop behind the neck that sent Johnno sprawling.

Johnno ended up on the rank floor, clutching hands over his bloody nose. Zhang staggered out of the cubicle, his shirt drenched and toilet water streaking down his face. Greg let him deliver a single kick in revenge for the bog-washing before pulling him back.

'Johnno's had enough,' Greg smiled. 'You OK, Zhang?'

Zhang had taken a beating and his voice trembled. 'That toilet was nasty.'

'You've got bus fare,' Greg said. 'Go home, take a shower. You'll only miss half of first lesson and we'll cover for you.'

Over on the floor near the urinals, Johnno was coughing and trying to find his feet.

Greg pointed Johnno's way and snarled, 'You stay down until we've left.'

As Zhang headed out George came over from the changing area where he'd been nervously inspecting Thomas Moran.

'I think he's alive,' George said.

'He'll be fine,' Greg replied. 'Little tap on the temple never killed anyone. He'll have concussion and a nice headache to remember me by.'

'We'd better get out of here,' George said. 'If someone sees this . . .'

'Just gimme a sec,' Greg said, grabbing a horrible grey sliver of soap stuck on the side of the only working sink and turning on the tap. 'Can't walk around with your blood all over my fists, can I Johno?'

Johno had a rugby player's build and was nearly six feet tall, but he'd propped himself against the wall and was fighting back tears.

Greg dried his hands on his trousers as George followed him out into the corridor.

'What if Johno grasses you?' George asked anxiously.

'Yeah right,' Greg smiled. 'They're both twice my size. Who's gonna believe that story?'

'I wouldn't believe it myself if I hadn't seen with my own eyes,' George gushed. 'I owe you, man. I thought I was gonna get serious beats. I know you said you knew some kickboxing moves, but I never knew you were *that* good. Usually when people brag about being a black belt or some crap like that it's all made up . . .'

'My dad's an instructor,' Greg said. 'I practise every day after school.'

'Awesome,' George said. 'Nobody's gonna give us any hassle once this story spreads around.'

Greg smiled coyly as they rounded the bottom of the

staircase, heading back to their second-floor form room. He'd lied about his dad, a man who'd really died in Australia fifteen months earlier and had never kickboxed in his life.

Greg's full name was Gregory Rathbone, but the other agents on CHERUB campus always called him Rat.

4. PUNISHMENT

The assault course on CHERUB campus was a two-kilometre circuit, complete with rat-infested tunnels, rope swings, climbing walls, jagged rocks and a fast-flowing stream. A normal twelve-year-old might complete the course in an hour, although the chances are they'd fail at least one obstacle because of some weakness – like being scared of heights, not having enough strength to swing over the hanging bars, or good enough balance to cross the narrow beams.

But the eight kids Zara Asker sent for punishment had all completed the course hundreds of times during their basic training. Andy Lagan and Lauren Adams both had personal-best assault course times below twenty minutes. They still found running the course exhausting, but they could handle it and it certainly didn't satisfy Instructor Speaks' definition of a punishment.

Miss Speaks was the kind of woman you didn't want to get on the wrong side of. Her shoulders were huge, her voice boomed like she'd swallowed a megaphone and she was particularly proud of her massive arms, which enabled her to beat everyone on campus at arm wrestling, including all of the male training instructors.

To make the assault course tougher, Speaks gave the eight kids backpacks containing ten to fifteen kilos of lead plates, depending upon their age and height. Between the obstacles, she'd marked out exercise stations where the agents had to perform squats, crunches, jumping jacks or whatever. And as if that wasn't enough, the assault course was fitted with traps which made the course more difficult if someone was on hand to operate them.

The course started with a run up a fifty-metre slope. In places it was so steep that you had to use rocks as footholds and haul yourself up lengths of knotted rope. If you got this wrong you'd roll down to the bottom if you were lucky, or split your head open on a rock if you weren't.

The top of this hill was the highest part of the assault course, from which an instructor could survey the entire training compound. After a short run over flat ground were three long beams placed two metres apart. At ten centimetres wide, crossing them didn't require exceptional balance, but you needed some nerve because after the first few steps the ground dropped away and you found yourself suspended above a stagnant pool surrounded by beds of stinging nettles.

Some of the older agents on campus worked as assistants to the training instructors. Fifteen-year-old James Adams had snapped up the chance to escape double History and help Miss Speaks out, especially as he'd spent the previous evening on his PlayStation instead of writing his essay on Napoleon.

James sat on a wooden platform suspended between two oak trees which overlooked the narrow beams. His mate Bruce Norris squatted a couple of metres away, while in between were two red punchbags, suspended from a sturdy branch in the canopy above.

In the distance James and Bruce heard kids grunting as they hauled themselves up the slope, while Miss Speaks leaned over the edge taunting them.

'Move it, brats!' Speaks bellowed, as she kicked a clump of dry earth down the slope on to the trainees. 'Grab that rope and heave . . . You call that heaving? You'd *better* put some oomph in unless you want your butts enrolled on a two-month after-school fitness programme.'

James smirked as his sister Lauren's head emerged over the top of the slope. The assault course was easier if you worked with a partner and Andy was just a couple of steps behind her. The pair were starting their third circuit out of four and the hot weather was doing them in.

Lauren's face was bright red and sweat streamed out of her tied-back hair. Andy's grey shirt had dark sweat patches under the arms, while their trousers and bare arms were encrusted with filth after crawling through the tunnel and

wading across a muddy stream basin.

‘Push-ups,’ Speaks screamed. ‘I want twenty-five. Don’t gawp like a pair of prunes. Move, move, move!’

James watched as his sister and Andy hit the ground. Lauren was stocky and easily knocked off twenty-five push-ups, despite having twelve and a half kilos of lead on her back. Andy’s skinny arms were not only weaker than Lauren’s, they were gangly – meaning he had to move a lot further to complete each push-up. After fifteen his arms gave out.

‘What the hell is that?’ Speaks demanded. ‘Call yourself a man? Your girlfriend’s tougher than you.’

Andy tried to make a sixteenth push-up – he was in good shape and could manage forty when he hadn’t just completed two circuits of the assault course on the hottest day of the year – but his shoulders ached and his arms shuddered before collapsing back to the hot earth.

‘You’re so weak,’ Speaks shouted, as she planted her size-eleven boot on the back of Andy’s head. ‘You’re a mealy little worm. What are you?’

Andy found it hard to speak because his lips were squished in the dirt. ‘Mweely lwttle worm,’ he gasped.

‘Wriggle like a worm then,’ Speaks shouted.

Humiliated, Andy wriggled his hips and flailed his arms in the dirt. Lauren scowled furiously at the instructor.

‘Are you eyeballing me, sister?’ Speaks shouted. ‘Why don’t you abandon him? What use is this little worm to you?’

'He's my partner,' Lauren said loyally.

'Tell you what,' Speaks said, sounding like she'd just had the greatest idea in history. 'He's ten short. How about you get down in the dirt and do 'em for him?'

Lauren didn't like it, but she wanted the instructor out of her sight so she hit the dirt and started counting Andy's press-ups. Her lead-filled pack was chafing all the skin on her back, she was boiling hot, her arms hurt and sweat dripped off the end of her nose into the dirt.

Strict discipline, tough punishments and hard physical training were the three worst things about being a CHERUB agent, but they gave cherubs an edge that enabled them to work safely undercover and accomplish tasks well beyond the scope of ordinary kids.

There was nothing to stop Lauren or any other agent quitting campus and going to live an ordinary life with a foster family, but even when her lungs burned and her boots were full of blisters she never considered it. Because when you showered off, patched up your wounds and looked in the mirror you saw an extraordinary person looking back at you.

Three years earlier, Lauren had arrived on campus as a bright but perfectly ordinary nine-year-old. Now she was one of the most highly rated agents on CHERUB campus. She spoke fluent Spanish and Russian, was fit enough to run ten kilometres without getting out of breath, could handle a car on a skid pan, load and shoot any firearm you cared to name and if she couldn't get her hands on a

weapon she also knew several ways to kill you with her bare hands.

As Lauren made the tenth and final upwards push, Miss Speaks' enormous hand pressed down against her pack. The harder Lauren fought to straighten her arms, the more Speaks pushed against them.

'Back-chatting a guest on campus,' Speaks tutted. 'Are you regretting it now, you vile little tramp?'

Lauren tried not to think about how this was all Jake Parker's fault as she gritted her teeth and stared at the dirt. Sweat was now pouring down her face and her stomach muscles felt like they were going to explode, but failure wasn't an option: Miss Speaks would only devise some other form of torture.

Lauren finally came close to getting her arms straight, but Speaks shoved downwards and Lauren found her nose back in the dirt and grit sticking to her sweaty face. In basic training cherubs are taught to shut out pain and focus on a seven-word mantra: *This is tough but cherubs are tougher*. Lauren closed her eyes and silently mouthed it to herself.

Finally, after almost a minute of straining, Miss Speaks released her grip and Lauren completed the push-up.

'Determined,' Speaks said admiringly, as Lauren staggered to her feet. 'You've got heart.'

Compliments from training instructors were as rare as chicks hatching from Cadbury's Creme Eggs. Lauren grudgingly acknowledged the compliment as she straightened up. The heat made her woozy and her eyes

moved in different directions as she looked ahead.

‘Move off then,’ Speaks yelled. ‘Across those beams before my boot comes swiftly into contact with your little pink arses.’

‘You OK?’ Andy asked guiltily as they staggered towards the beams. ‘Sorry. I’m so bad at push-ups.’

Lauren shrugged. ‘Not your fault God gave you weedy arms.’

James and Bruce watched from the platform in the trees as Lauren and Andy each lined up at the start of a beam. As Lauren stepped off, Bruce reached up and dropped a bar that held the punchbags in place. James and Bruce each grabbed a leather handle stitched to the back of a bag and lined up behind them.

‘I’ll go for Lauren,’ James said.

Because Lauren had done his push-ups, Andy felt fresher and moved off faster. Lauren could have done with a moment to catch her breath and wipe the grit off her face, but she knew Speaks would bite her head off if she showed any sign of slacking.

As Andy took his third step, Bruce gave his heavy bag an almighty shove towards him. James and Bruce’s platform was disguised by the trees and the first thing Andy knew about their presence was when the rope holding up the bag creaked and the huge leather sack sliced across his path just a few centimetres in front of him.

‘Missed,’ Bruce cursed, reaching out to catch the bag as it swung back towards the platform.

James released his bag. He didn't always get on with his sister, but he had no desire to knock her into a muddy pond so he swung the bag out wide, missing her by several metres.

'James Adams,' Miss Speaks shouted furiously. 'If I see you going soft like that again I'll have you running this assault course tomorrow.'

Andy should have cleared the beam already, but it takes a few seconds to compose yourself after you stop and Bruce's second shot came around in a circular arc. The bag smashed into Andy just as he got his balance back and started moving again.

'Bull's-eye!' Bruce shouted triumphantly.

As Lauren made a three-metre jump on to the muddy crash-mat at the end of her beam, Andy clattered through a canopy of overhanging branches and hit the pond below. After a big splash, Andy grabbed a branch and hauled himself out of the brown soup, but as he lunged forward a horrific pain shot down his chest, making him cry out.

The water was two metres deep and the bottom of the pond had a cushioned lining to prevent serious accidents, but Andy's face was screwed up in agony as he staggered towards the embankment. James and Bruce climbed down the rope ladder from their platform, then held their bare arms up high as they navigated the tangle of stinging nettles surrounding the water.

'What are you whinging about, Lagan?' James asked.

‘Cracked rib or something,’ Andy gasped. ‘It’s absolute agony, all down my right side.’

Up above, Jake Parker and his mate Ewan had made it up the slope at the start of their third circuit. They didn’t get push-ups because Miss Speaks was looking down at Andy and they didn’t get hit by the heavy bags because James and Bruce were guiding him through the stinging nettles.

Jake grinned at Lauren when he jumped off the beam, with Ewan coming off the next beam a few steps behind.

‘Looks like it’s our lucky day,’ Jake chirped, giving Lauren a cheeky wink. ‘What happened to your boyfriend?’

Lauren was sick of Jake and this was more than she could take. She made sure Miss Speaks wasn’t looking before grabbing Jake’s earlobe and twisting hard.

‘First off, he’s not my boyfriend,’ Lauren growled. ‘Second, if you’d behaved this morning I’d be sitting in a nice air-conditioned Art class right now. So stop smiling and start walking, because I’m this close to kicking the snot out of you.’

‘I’m so scared of you,’ Jake taunted, but only after Lauren had let go and he was well out of range.

On the opposite side of the lake Miss Speaks stared down at the three boys. ‘Is he really hurt?’ she asked suspiciously.

‘Looks like it,’ Bruce shouted up, as two more boys raced across the beams overhead.

Speaks shook her head and sighed dramatically. ‘OK,

James, you take the little worm to the medical unit and get him looked at. But I'm gonna be checking in with Dr Kessler, Andy. If you're faking, I'll have you back here for a special one-on-one training session that'll make this seem like a Buckingham Palace garden party.'

5. CASCADE

CHERUB campus has a small medical centre with six private rooms and a five-bed casualty ward. Andy lay at the far end of the well equipped ward, while an eight-year-old who'd burned her hand on a cake tin sat at the other end feeling sorry for herself.

Andy sat up, wincing with pain, as two men came through the swing doors. They were similar in appearance, with bald heads and silver-framed glasses. One was Dr Kessler, who Andy had been expecting for almost an hour. The other man was the mission controller John Jones, who he wasn't expecting at all.

Kessler had worked on campus for more than twenty years, but his German accent never faltered.

'Good news, I think,' he said, reaching across Andy's bed and peeling off his covers to examine his chest. 'I checked the X-ray and there's no break, but you've got some

nice bruises coming up. I just want you to try raising your left shoulder off the pillow.'

Andy barely lifted his shoulder before he hissed with pain and slumped back on to his pillow.

Dr Kessler looked at John Jones. 'He's pulled a muscle. It's probably the most common injury I see: the kids train hard and muscle is much more susceptible to damage when heavily fatigued.'

Andy looked at Dr Kessler. 'But I should be OK for my mission on Saturday, shouldn't I?'

John cut Andy off. 'I had a text message from Greg Rathbone about ninety minutes ago. George Lydon has to visit his aunt's house on Saturday, so he's moved the sleepover forward to tonight.'

'Damn,' Andy tutted.

'Why didn't you tell Zara that you had an important mission coming up?' John asked.

'I didn't want Lauren and them to think I was trying to wheedle out of it,' Andy explained. 'Is anyone else on campus trained to use AutoCAD software?'

John shook his head. 'You've had over twenty hours' training, there's no way we can get anyone up to your standard by this evening.'

'Strap me up and I'll get through it somehow,' Andy said bravely. 'I'll just tell everyone I got hurt playing football or something.'

'I can get Nurse Halstead to apply some strapping,' Dr Kessler nodded. 'But you'd still be in a significant amount

of pain. A painkilling injection would help, although the injection is intra-muscular so it will hurt, and the affected area will feel quite peculiar; the same kind of numb feeling you get after a filling at the dentist.'

'The choice is entirely yours, Andy,' John emphasised. 'You don't have to put yourself through this. If you pull out of the mission nobody will hold it against you.'

Andy shook his head determinedly. 'Rat's been trying to get us into Kurt Lydon's house for over a month. I'll do what it takes.'

Dr Kessler headed back across the ward and unlocked a wheeled rubber cabinet, fitted with hundreds of tiny drawers. John pulled a wodge of paperwork out of his jacket.

'It'll take about ninety minutes to drive to Milton Keynes,' John said. 'And I want to get on the road before the kids get out of school. So I need you to go through your mission background document and the detailed briefing. If you've got any questions now's the time to ask.'

Andy took the papers and shrugged. 'I've read all this twenty times already.'

'I know,' John nodded. 'But I'm always paranoid that my agents will forget something at the last minute. Do me a favour and give it a final once-over, OK?'

Andy nodded reluctantly as Dr Kessler headed back holding a sterile syringe pack.

'This should be good for twelve to sixteen hours,' Kessler said. 'But remember that the muscle underneath

is still damaged. You've got to avoid doing anything too physical.'

After swabbing Andy's chest with a sterile wipe, the doctor ripped the plastic wrapping from the syringe pack and twisted off a plastic bung, unveiling a long needle.

'Bloody hell!' Andy gasped. 'Is that going to hurt as much as I think it's going to?'

'Oh, it's ten times worse than it looks,' Dr Kessler said sarcastically. 'Just take deep breaths and keep still. It'll only take a few moments.'

Andy let go of John's paperwork and dug his nails into the mattress as the needle pierced his stomach.

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***CLASSIFIED MISSION BACKGROUND
DOCUMENT***

FOR GREG 'RAT' RATHBONE & ANDY LAGAN
DO NOT PHOTOCOPY OR MAKE NOTES

MISSION BACKGROUND – THE NUCLEAR CLUB

Since the United States detonated the first atomic bombs in 1945 many other countries have attempted to build their own nuclear weapons. At present eight other countries are known to possess nuclear weapons (Russia, United Kingdom, France, China, India, Pakistan, North Korea and Israel) while others such as Japan and Germany have nuclear technology but have chosen not to make bombs.

For every country that has nuclear weapons there are many more that want them. Some of these countries are poor and have

no realistic chances of developing a nuclear arsenal. Others, particularly in the oil-rich Middle East, are wealthy but lack the scientific and industrial base needed to develop them.

These countries will pay huge sums of money to anyone who can supply them with nuclear secrets.

THE DARK SUN NETWORK

Over the past sixty years many groups and individuals have tried to cash in on the market for nuclear technology. In 2004 a joint operation between British and French intelligence officers led to the arrest of a woman who'd illegally purchased several tonnes of maraging steel. This specially hardened metal is mainly used in the nuclear industry and its production and export is strictly controlled.

Facing a lengthy prison term, the suspect agreed to cooperate. She gave the French intelligence service valuable information on a criminal organisation known as Dark Sun. Over the following months it became clear that Dark Sun was a sophisticated network that bought and sold secret nuclear technology. Its customers included governments in Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

THE CASCADE

The most difficult part of producing a nuclear bomb is turning ordinary uranium metal into the weapons grade variety needed to fuel a bomb. This is done by heating the metal until it becomes a gas and spinning it at very high speed in a centrifuge.

To make weapons grade material, uranium gas needs to be passed through a network of up to fifty thousand centrifuges known

as a cascade. Not only is a cascade hugely complex, but it also uses the electricity output of a large power station and any leak or malfunction will lead to the release of deadly radioactive gas.

KURT LYDON

The Dark Sun network wants to offer its customers reliable designs for uranium centrifuges. Several European and Chinese centrifuge designs are widely available, but these all date from the 1960s and 70s. Their performance and safety is well below that of the best modern equipment.

Kurt Lydon was part of a legitimate engineering team designing a new Anglo-French uranium centrifuge. By November 2006 the design was complete and a small cascade had been successfully tested, but the French government cancelled a planned uranium enrichment plant. The centrifuge project was canned and Kurt Lydon was out of a job.

Despite the high security surrounding any nuclear project, Lydon managed to steal the computerised blueprints for the new centrifuge shortly before he was laid off. The theft went undetected, but MI5 identified Lydon when he met with a suspected Dark Sun operative in a Brussels restaurant in February 2007.

Over the following weeks, MI5 bugged Lydon's home and all of his telephone conversations. Lydon was trying to sell the centrifuge design to the Dark Sun network for eight million euros. But the new design required sophisticated metal composites, bearings and motors that are subject to strict export controls.

Dark Sun might have been able to smuggle enough of these components to build a test centrifuge, but it would be impossible to

get hold of enough specialised material for the fifty thousand needed in a cascade.

Lydon was disappointed that his state-of-the-art design was of no value to the Dark Sun network. However, he received a more positive response when he offered to redesign the centrifuge so that it could be built from simpler components and materials.

THE PLAN

Lydon estimates that his redesign work will take eight to ten months. MI5 has considered arresting Lydon and his contacts. This might provide some intelligence, but only with junior members of the Dark Sun network.

MI5 wants to penetrate the highest levels of Dark Sun. The only way to do this is to allow Lydon to complete his redesign and then track his progress as he travels abroad to build and test it. However, if Lydon is successful, his easy-to-build centrifuge could enable dozens of countries to start making fuel for nuclear bombs.

MI5 has contacted some of Lydon's former colleagues. The centrifuge design contains over three thousand parts and nobody understands all of them. The engineers selected a list of four hundred key parts. These are all made from common materials, meaning Lydon would have no reason to alter their design or to examine them too closely.

Once the engineers had their list, they began to think up minute changes to these parts that would affect their performance. In a centrifuge spinning at 25,000rpm a hundredth of a gram imbalance in weight can cause a catastrophic failure; the wrong type of plastic seal can create an explosive venting of gas; or a tiny

imperfection in the centrifuge lining can cause a heat build-up that makes the entire unit explode.

A failed centrifuge is likely to spread radioactive debris, but experts believe that contamination will be confined to a small area. Engineers and technicians working for Dark Sun may come to serious harm, but MI5 feels this risk is acceptable, given that millions of lives would be endangered if a rogue state or terrorist group obtained a nuclear bomb.

The engineers studied the individual parts and honed their list down to 143 tiny design alterations that will be unnoticeable on a computer screen and impossible to pinpoint in the aftermath of an explosion.

It is believed that ironing out all of these tiny faults will actually take longer than designing a new centrifuge from scratch. Testing the flawed design will also take years, cost millions of dollars and undermine the credibility of the Dark Sun network.

THE PROBLEM

Kurt Lydon has already begun work on his revised design. Someone will have to access the computer-aided design workstation in the study at Kurt Lydon's Milton Keynes home and enter all 143 design alterations by hand.

MI5 believed this would be a relatively simple matter of disabling Lydon's burglar alarm and breaking in, but the Dark Sun network is keeping a close eye on Kurt Lydon and has his home under twenty-four-hour surveillance.

No adult operative will be able to get inside Lydon's office and access the workstation without arousing suspicion. However,

Lydon has a thirteen-year-old son, George, and a fifteen-year-old daughter, Sophie. It has been suggested that a pair of CHERUB agents may be able to befriend George and/or Sophie, infiltrate Kurt Lydon's home and then sabotage the centrifuge design.

6. INTRODUCING

'You boys OK?' John Jones asked, as he drove a Nissan 4x4 across a deserted roundabout. Andy and Greg sat in the back.

'All set, boss,' Greg nodded, before looking across at Andy. 'Just remember not to call me Rat.'

'OK, Rat,' Andy smirked.

John turned into a modern development of detached houses and slowed down so that he could catch the house numbers as he rolled by. At number twenty-two he turned on to a brick driveway and pulled up beside a silver Astra.

The boys reached over the back seat to grab their backpacks before following him up to the front door. A slim woman opened up before they had a chance to ring the bell. George hurried up the hallway behind her, dressed in a T-shirt and Futurama boxers.

'You must be Dr Lydon,' John smiled, giving himself a bit of an Australian accent so that he'd pass for Greg's dad. 'Thanks for having the boys. If there's any problem whatsoever just give me a call.'

'Call me Susie,' George's mum said, as she shook John's hand. 'It's no bother. They've got money for pizza and three dozen X-box games, so they'll pretty much take care of themselves.'

As the adults spoke on the doorstep, Greg and Andy ducked under Dr Lydon's arm, kicked off their trainers and headed upstairs to George's bedroom.

'You boys behave,' John shouted after them.

'No worries, Dad,' Greg shouted back. 'See you in the morning.'

The house was comfortable, but it wouldn't win any design awards and smelled slightly like cats. George had a smallish bedroom, but he had a cool AV setup with surround-sound speakers and a 37-inch LCD mounted on the wall. Zhang had arrived early and was playing *Forza Motorsport Two* with the volume turned up loud. He'd stripped down to a pair of Chelsea shorts because the room was stifling, and sat himself cross-legged on the end of George's bed.

'Nice bruises, Zhang,' Greg noted.

Zhang shook his head. 'It was nice of you to leave your Karate Kid act until *after* Johnno battered me and stuck my head down the crapper.'

'Until today I thought getting your head stuck down the

school toilet was just an urban myth,' Greg smiled, before looking across at Andy. 'This is my cousin. He's down from Scotland for the first week of the holiday.'

Zhang was driving a Dodge Challenger through a chicane, so he just made a grunting noise.

'You've got four controllers,' Andy smiled.

'Yeah,' George said proudly. 'You any good at *Virtua Tennis*? We can play a doubles tournament.'

'Bagsy not Zhang's team,' Greg blurted. 'He sucks.'

'Screw you,' Zhang shouted. 'You can't expect anyone to play brilliantly the first time you pick it up. I took you to a tiebreak that last set— AAARGH, I hate that stupid corner so much!'

George cracked up laughing as Zhang's Challenger clattered through a gravel trap before smashing into a tyre wall.

'Tossers!' Zhang shouted, as he threw the controller at the bed. 'Second place - I had him all lined up to overtake on the next straight.'

The boys all jumped as George's mum's voice sounded in the doorway.

'Haven't you heard of knocking?' George tutted.

'I did knock,' she yelled. 'If you didn't have those speakers turned up so loud . . .'

George crawled across the floor and turned down the volume on his hi-fi.

'Sit up as long as you like and have your fun,' Dr Lydon said firmly. 'But I've been on at the hospital for sixteen

hours and I'm going to bed as soon as I've had my shower, so keep the noise down. OK?"

'Don't worry, Mum,' George said. 'We'll be quieter than mice in silk slippers.'

George's mum smiled. 'There's crisps in the cupboard, Ben and Jerry's in the freezer and some of those microwave burrito thingies that you like. I'll leave you to it.'

Greg looked surprised as she headed down the corridor. 'So your mum's going to bed?'

George broke into a big smile. 'It's so mint!' he grinned. 'My dad's gone off for some business meeting in Belgium, Sophie's going out clubbing with one of her mates and my mum's just worked a double shift at the hospital. Once she's asleep we own this joint!'

'Cool,' Zhang said.

Andy and Greg exchanged covert smiles: the fewer people in the house, the easier it would be to access Kurt Lydon's computer.

'It gets better,' Greg said, as he pulled his sleeping bag off the top of his backpack and dragged out eight cans of beer.

George eyed them warily. 'If my mum sees that...'

Zhang tutted. 'Don't be a wuss, Georgie. It's only two cans each. It won't kill you.'

'Four each, actually,' Andy grinned. 'There's eight more in my bag.'

Zhang smiled at Andy. 'I'm starting to like you already, mate.'

'I suppose,' George said. 'But we'd better wait until my mum's asleep. And you'll have to take the empty cans home because if she sees that lot in the rubbish she'll kill me.'

'We're all getting hammered!' Zhang sang. 'We're all getting hammered.'

'Mind if I use your toilet, George?' Andy asked politely.

'Better than pissing on the carpet,' George smiled, as he opened his door and pointed along the hallway. 'Second door on the right.'

Across the hallway, George's sister Sophie stepped out of her room. She was dressed for a night out in black heels and a black dress that left plenty of flesh on display.

'Look boys,' George grinned. 'All done up like a dog's dinner.'

Sophie flicked her brother off. 'What's all this then?' she sneered. 'X-box and *Battlestar Galactica* DVDs? You're *such* a bunch of losers.'

'Yeah,' George scoffed. 'Much better to sit at the back of the cinema getting tongued by that chav Daniel.'

Sophie tutted with contempt as she headed down the hallway towards the bathroom, then banged furiously on the door when she realised that Andy was inside.

'Outta there, geeko!' she yelled.

'Use the one downstairs,' George said.

'I can't, thicko,' Sophie growled. 'Mum's in the shower.'

Andy was in a strange house with people he didn't know,

so he apologised to Sophie as he emerged from the bathroom.

‘Just get out my way,’ she growled.

George shrugged apologetically as Andy headed back towards the bedroom.

‘Sticks and stones,’ Andy said casually.

‘I know how to get her back,’ George grinned, as he darted into his sister’s room.

Seconds later, George emerged with a floppy-eared toy rabbit and plunged it headfirst down the front of his boxers.

‘Oh you naughty rabbit!’ George said noisily, as the other three boys burst out laughing.

George raced down the hall with the soft toy protruding ridiculously from his shorts and banged on the bathroom door.

‘Sophie,’ George said sweetly. ‘Mr Rabbit’s in trouble!’

‘How many times?’ Sophie shouted, as she burst out of the bathroom with wet hands. ‘Stay out of my room you little freak.’

But she didn’t go really bananas until she saw the pair of furry legs sticking out of her brother’s boxers.

‘Dirty little git,’ she screamed. ‘You’re getting such a slap.’

George started to run but Sophie wrapped an arm around her brother’s waist as he scrambled through his bedroom doorway.

‘Ooof,’ Zhang laughed, as George took a brutal slap across the cheek. ‘I felt that.’

Sophie ripped the bunny out of George's shorts before slapping his back and knocking him to the ground. 'Stay out of my room,' Sophie screamed. 'Don't you *ever* touch my stuff, geek.'

'You wait and see what I do while you're out,' George said, unperturbed by the huge red welt on his face. 'Mr Bunny has a date with my Stanley knife.'

Sophie pinned George against the hallway wall with her leg before bending forwards and grabbing his skinny ankles. There was a desperate turn in George's expression which the other lads didn't understand.

'Sophie, I'm sorry!' George gasped. 'Don't.'

George grasped at the door frame, but Sophie was way stronger than her scrawny brother and she started dragging him down the hallway. As she picked up speed, his bare back zipped across the shaggy nylon carpet.

'Noooo,' he screamed desperately. 'Mummmm!'

Greg, Andy and Zhang piled out into the corridor to watch. As George sat up, his three friends saw the bright red friction burn caused by his high speed ride across the carpet. George screwed up his face in pain, but didn't want his mates to see that he was hurting.

'Stay out of my room, loser,' Sophie shouted.

'Evil bitch,' George shouted back.

Downstairs a door clicked open and George's mum stormed out of the shower room in a pastel green dressing gown and matching slippers.

'Pack it in,' she shouted. 'I'm so sick of you two. You're

thirteen and fifteen, but you act like you're still three and five. Look what you've done to his back!

'Oh, why not take his side for a change, Mum?' Sophie said sarcastically. 'He stuck Mr Rabbit's head down his pissy shorts. All I want is for the little prick to stay out of my room.'

'Why can't you just die of cancer?' George shouted, as he grabbed the banister and hauled himself up.

Sophie poked out her tongue. 'Loser,' she hissed.

George's mum growled furiously. 'How many times have I told you to stay out of each other's rooms?'

'I can't trust him,' Sophie shouted. 'I'm gonna come home and find pizza crusts in my bed or something.'

'Just get out of my sight, Sophie,' her mum shouted. 'Your father put locks on all the doors to stop this nonsense. Have you turned the key?'

'I can't find it,' Sophie admitted.

George's mum pointed her daughter downstairs at the front door. 'I've got a spare. Now get out of this house before I really lose my temper and ground the pair of you.'

As Sophie slammed the front door, her mum steamed down the hallway towards the other three boys, who'd all disappeared into George's room because she looked like she'd bite the head off anyone who dared open their mouth.

She leaned into Sophie's room and spotted the supposedly lost key amidst the jumble of hair products and GCSE revision on the desk.

‘Right,’ George’s mum said, as she locked Sophie’s room and put the key in her dressing-gown pocket. ‘You boys might be on holidays, but I’ve got to go to work tomorrow. So have fun, but if anyone wakes me up there’s gonna be major eruptions.’

7. TREES

George slowly closed the door of his mum's bedroom, feeling a little woozy as he crept down the hallway towards his room. It was almost ten and nearly dark outside, but it was still boiling hot, so the four boys just wore shorts.

'She's soundo,' George grinned as he stepped back into his room.

The room smelled mostly like pizza, but there was also a whiff of beer and sweat. The floor was strewn with crumbs and pizza boxes, while Zhang had added to the carnage by stepping up on George's bed and sticking a slice of cheese-topped garlic bread to the ceiling.

'More beer?' Greg asked, as he pulled out a can.

'Don't mind if I do,' Zhang slurred.

Before handing the beer across, Greg tilted the can, making sure there was a little blue mark on the bottom: they'd brought sixteen identical looking cans, but the

contents had been tampered with by the technical team on CHERUB campus.

The ones with blue marks were for George and Zhang and contained full strength beer, injected with a powerful sedative. The beer in the unmarked cans had been sucked out and replaced with an alcohol-free variety. If the plan worked out, George and Zhang would get drunk and crash out, while CHERUB agents Greg and Andy remained wide awake and sober.

‘Check this out, babes,’ George shouted jubilantly as he threw his bedroom window wide open and climbed up on to the ledge.

Andy and Greg were horrified as George hurled himself through the first-floor window. They were supposed to be monitoring how drunk George and Zhang got and their mission would go straight down the toilet if someone ended up in casualty.

There was a crunch of branches followed by a triumphant whoop from George as Andy and Greg leaned out of the window. George was laughing wildly as he clambered out of a dense hedge.

‘I’ve *always* wanted to try that,’ George said, as he collapsed backwards on to the lawn, howling with laughter and thumping his chest. ‘Much beer give caveman George courage.’

Despite his initial alarm, Greg realised that the hedge was huge and the drop on to it from the first-floor window less than two metres.

‘Come on you pussies,’ George shouted. ‘It’s such a rush.’

Andy pointed to the strapping around his chest. ‘I don’t want to rip this lot off.’

Greg had no such qualms and vaulted on to the window ledge before diving face first into the huge hedge. The leaves and branches were prickly, but it was a riot having the thick shrubbery crashing around his head and then trying to untangle himself.

Greg had only drunk alcohol-free beer, but he had to act drunk so he howled like a loon as he staggered out on to the lawn. Zhang seemed less confident as he climbed on to the window ledge.

‘Come on down, fat-boy,’ George taunted.

George and Greg cheered as Zhang crashed forward out of the window. At first it looked the same as when the first two boys dropped, but Zhang’s weight pushed him deeper into the hedge and there was an almighty snap of wood as one of the main stems holding up the hedge snapped.

‘AAAARGH!’ Zhang screamed.

He ended up with his legs high in the air, atop a giant clump of snapped hedge strewn across the back lawn.

Zhang wasn’t hurt and Greg laughed as he helped him up, but George was freaking out over the state of the hedge.

‘My dad’s gonna slaughter me,’ George gasped.

Greg grabbed the main chunk of the broken hedge and rested it against the intact pieces on either side. ‘Good as new,’ he grinned.

‘It’s not funny you guys!’ George moaned, as he crouched over and picked up leaves and snapped branches scattered over the lawn.

A torch flickered on in the garden next door and an old woman’s voice came from behind the fence. ‘What the devil’s going on out there?’

‘Miss Hampstead,’ George gasped, as he started running around the side of the house.

‘Go back indoors, you nosy old bat,’ Zhang shouted.

‘She’s Sophie’s godmother: practically family,’ George whispered. He gave Zhang a shove before looking up towards his bedroom window. ‘Andy, get downstairs and open the front door before she shines that light over the fence!’

Andy smiled thoughtfully out of the window. ‘I might do,’ he grinned.

Andy laughed as the other three scrambled up the driveway, yelping as chunks of gravel dug into their bare feet. When they got inside George looked up the stairs nervously, half expecting the racket to have woken his mum up.

The boys muffled their giggles as they headed up the stairs, but Zhang held his hand over his mouth to stifle a huge yawn.

‘Man, I’m knackered all of a sudden,’ Zhang complained, stepping back into George’s bedroom and crashing backwards on to the bed.

‘Know what you mean,’ George nodded, as he caught the yawn. ‘That beer’s given me a headache.’

'Can't take your drink,' Greg teased, as he looked at his watch and saw that it was ten-fifteen. It was ninety minutes since George and Zhang had taken their first mouthful of drugged beer and the sedative was kicking in right on schedule.

'We never got around to *Virtua Tennis*,' Andy said, as George slumped on to a leather beanbag. 'You guys up for it?'

Zhang had his eyes closed and George waved his hand in front of his face. 'You start off, I need a few minutes' rest.'

Greg loaded the tennis game into the X-box and turned the hi-fi volume down low as he grabbed one of the wireless controllers. The two CHERUB agents played half-heartedly. Andy won the first set on a tiebreak, but there were no protests or celebrations.

Instead, Andy leaned across the bed and pinched Zhang's cheek, while Greg crept across the carpet and jabbed George's thigh with his big toe.

'Sleeping like babies,' Greg said. 'Get the kit.'

Andy unzipped a pocket on the side of his backpack and pulled out a plastic wallet. It looked like a packet of felt-tips, but instead of pens it contained twelve identical syringes filled with a fast-acting sedative. The sedative in the beer worked for less than two hours and it was hard to tell exactly how much they'd drunk. George and Zhang had to be injected with something more powerful to ensure that they didn't wake up.

Even the gentlest of injections can turn into a small

swelling and a bruise which looks obvious on open skin, so Andy had to inject an area of the body that's hard to inspect.

'Show me some butt,' Andy grinned.

Greg rolled Zhang on to his belly and pulled down the back of his boxers.

'Gross,' Greg choked, gagging and turning away. 'It's skidmark city down there.'

Andy tried not to breathe as he pulled Zhang's buttock upwards and wiped a patch of skin with a sterile wipe. He then dug the needle into the fold where Zhang's flabby bum met the back of his thigh.

After injecting enough sedative to keep Zhang under for six hours, Greg hitched up the boxers and rolled Zhang on to his back again. George weighed half as much and showered twice as often, so it was a much more pleasant experience rolling him off the beanbag and injecting his buttock as he lay flat on the floor.

Greg tucked a pillow under George's head before looking uneasily towards Andy. 'Two down, one to go.'

'The tricky one,' Andy noted, as he pulled a green cylinder and a gas mask out of his backpack before heading down the hallway behind Greg.

Dr Lydon was probably asleep, but she wasn't sedated like the boys and would wake with a start before they got anywhere near sticking a needle in her butt. She had to be taken down in a two-stage process, the first of which involved a powerful knock-out gas.

Greg approached first, quietly opening the bedroom door and stepping into the gloomy room. If Dr Lydon had been awake, he'd have pretended to have walked into the wrong room on the way to the toilet, but the doctor was dead to the world after her double shift at the hospital.

'Clear,' Greg said, as he backed out.

Andy tightened the straps of the gas mask behind his head and leaned into the room holding the pressurised cylinder. He pointed the nozzle up at the ceiling over the double bed and pressed the trigger to release a gentle mist. Job done, Andy backed out and swiftly pulled shut the door.

'Give it four minutes for the gas to clear out of the air,' Greg said, looking at his watch as Andy pulled off his mask and tucked it back inside his pack, along with the gas cylinder.

After an anxious wait crouching in the hallway, Andy burst noisily into Dr Lydon's bedroom. He flicked on the light and stumbled on to the bed. This was a deliberate strategy: if the gas hadn't worked for some reason, he'd get yelled at for waking George's mum but she'd hopefully think nothing of it apart from some hyped-up kid bursting through the wrong door.

In many ways this was the trickiest part of the whole operation, so Andy was delighted to find himself sprawled over Dr Lydon's legs, with the mattress bouncing but the doctor's body completely limp.

‘Gimme a needle,’ Andy shouted, as he ripped off the duvet.

The boys were slightly freaked out as the bedding landed on the floor. They’d both been through CHERUB training and were capable of all sorts of remarkable feats, but it was still a shock seeing one of your mate’s mums sprawled naked and unconscious over the bed in front of you.

‘I feel like a right perv,’ Greg confessed, as he rolled Dr Lydon on to her front.

‘Snap some pics with your camera phone,’ Andy grinned. ‘That’ll freak Georgie boy out when he wakes up.’

‘Be serious,’ Greg said, snorting with laughter as he swabbed Dr Lydon’s skin with a sterile wipe before Andy plunged the needle into the back of her thigh.

Greg threw the duvet back over the doctor before following Andy out into the hallway. He’d flipped his phone open to dial their mission controller.

‘John,’ Andy said cheerfully. ‘Phase one’s in the bag. Everyone’s sedated and we’re about to move into Kurt Lydon’s study.’

8. WINDOWS

Kurt Lydon's study was locked, but that's not a major problem for a CHERUB agent. Greg opened the door easily, using a straight pick attached to his lock gun. Two bedrooms had been knocked together to create Kurt's workspace and thirty thousand pounds had been invested in specialised computer equipment.

Two powerful Dell workstations hummed away inside a special cooling cabinet and there was a huge inkjet plotter for making blueprints. One wall shelved thick books with titles like *Advanced Molecular Thermodynamics* and *Mathematical Modelling for Turbulent Plumes and Jets*. Pride of place went to a pair of 30-inch ultra-high-resolution LCD panels, worth over ten grand apiece. Beside Kurt's regular keyboard and mouse was a multi-buttoned spaceball controller, designed for manipulating 3D images on screen.

Andy had spent hours practising with an identical system

on CHERUB campus, but still felt intimidated as he sank into Kurt Lydon's high-backed office chair. He tapped the space bar and was pleased to see that the computer was only in standby, but the screen demanded a password.

Greg was already on the case. He'd sneaked into the room on an after-school visit two weeks earlier and installed a hardware keylogger between the keyboard plug and the USB port on the back of Kurt's main computer.

Keyloggers contain memory chips that record every keystroke entered into a computer. When the logger got back to the MI5 lab it would hopefully reveal all sorts of information that Kurt had typed over the previous fortnight, but all they needed right now was Kurt's main password.

Greg pulled a tiny laptop out of his backpack, plugged in the keylogger and sat on the floor while the machine booted up.

'We haven't got all night,' Andy moaned.

'Keep your wig on,' Greg teased. 'These tiny laptops aren't very powerful. It takes a couple of minutes to boot up and there's diddly squat I can do about it.'

Andy hated waiting around. Missions were OK when his mind was occupied, but he had a nervous disposition and waiting always made him start thinking about stuff that could go wrong.

'OK,' Greg said when he'd finally accessed the keylogger data. 'First session, last Friday week. Capital A R then lower case *i s t o t l e* followed by a hash, a percentage sign and the numbers five, three, one and eight.'

Andy was relieved that Windows accepted the password. 'Never would have guessed that one,' he gasped, as the desktop and taskbar appeared on screen.

The screen was specifically designed for high resolution work, which left the dozens of tiny icons looking like specks amidst the huge expanse of screen. Greg put his laptop on the carpet and passed Andy a ring-binder and CD-rom from his backpack.

Andy placed the silver disc in a tray and let the Dell swallow it. A dialogue box popped up on screen and he clicked OK to install a forensic program designed by the security services, known as Window Breaker. The program froze time, ensuring that no time and date stamps were left when files were altered. It also enabled a back door into the Windows operating system that bypassed most Windows security protocols.

The second program on the CD was a Trojan horse. Once installed, MI5 would be able to access Kurt's computer, remotely reading his files and monitoring all activity. The instant the program was installed, Kurt's anti-virus software flashed up a warning. Andy had fully expected this and the third program on the CD dealt with it by installing a patch that made the anti-virus turn a blind eye to the unwanted software.

'OK, that's the software installed,' Andy smiled. 'You'd better start hunting for the dreaded backups.'

Andy planned to spend most of the next three hours altering Kurt's centrifuge design so that it wouldn't work.

Greg had to search the office and the rest of the house and overwrite any backup copies he could find with a doctored version of the original stolen file.

But this left MI5 with two major headaches. First, if Kurt looked back at any previous versions of his work for any reason he'd realise that the files had been tampered with. Second, there was no way of knowing whether Kurt had stashed an extra backup under the floorboards, at a friend's house, or even in a safety deposit box on the other side of town.

All MI5 could do about this was cross their fingers, not let Lydon out of sight and move swiftly to arrest him if he began to suspect that he was under surveillance.

'Remember,' Andy said, 'it's a twenty-gigabyte file, so it won't fit on a memory stick or a DVD. You're only looking for backup hard drives.'

Greg sounded slightly irritated. 'I know, Andy. I read the briefing too.'

He started off by running a search on the hard drives of Kurt Lydon's twin servers as Andy opened Lydon's AutoCAD software and found the latest version of the centrifuge design. The 3D model comprised over three thousand parts and even on one of the fastest PCs available it took nearly two minutes to load.

Once Andy was sure that he'd opened the right file he plugged a portable hard drive into the USB port on the front of the machine and made a duplicate copy. MI5 would study this file to establish how quickly Kurt was

progressing with his simplified design.

By the time this was finished, Greg had overwritten a file on the other PC and began searching drawers and shelves for backup drives.

Andy now had to enter the alterations that would sabotage Kurt's redesign work. A hundred and forty-three parts had to be changed, and each one required up to a dozen individual alterations.

It was impossible to remember all of these, so one of Lydon's former colleagues had made a checklist, complete with detailed instructions, screenshots and even printouts of specific menus within the sophisticated software. It was delicate work: one decimal point in the wrong place could leave an obvious flaw in the design that would make Kurt Lydon suspicious and blow the whole operation.

Andy put one hand over the spaceball and another over the keyboard before muttering 'Concentrate,' to himself.

He opened the ring-binder and started to read: *Alteration one, locate part spacer bearing seventeen.* Andy navigated expertly with the spaceball, finding the part using the search tool, zooming in and then changing the display properties so that the wire frame outline of his target part was the only thing on screen.

Select the fourth and sixth sprocket holes. Alter the thread properties from one sixteenth of a millimetre to one eighteenth of a millimetre. Rotate the object in relationship to the Y-axis within the main design by point zero seven of a degree.

It was brain numbing stuff and it wasn't helped by Greg humming as he rifled noisily through a filing cabinet.

'Dude,' Andy said fiercely. 'Shut up.'

Greg didn't appreciate the tone, but he'd seen the complexity of Andy's instructions and didn't envy his task. 'Sorry mate,' he said. 'I'll be done searching here in a minute anyway.'

*

Two hours later, Andy sat at the giant screens rubbing tired eyes. Greg took a mouthful of Pepsi and popped a couple of M&Ms in his mouth. Greg had inspected the family PC and George's laptop, but the only centrifuge design he'd found was an original stored on a backup hard drive on top of a kitchen cabinet.

To speed Andy's task, Greg now stood alongside with the ring-binder, reading his instructions out loud. The operation wasn't going badly and they were ahead of schedule, but the task required absolute concentration and it was three hours past when they'd normally be in bed.

'Alteration one hundred,' Greg said, sounding slightly triumphant because they'd finally progressed to a three-digit number. 'Open the sub-model of the motor unit G and alter the specification of the insulation . . .'

Greg didn't finish because his phone started to vibrate. It was their mission controller.

'How's it going?' John asked.

'Not too shabby,' Greg said. 'It doesn't look like Kurt's too thorough about backing up his data and we should be

finished inside an hour if we're not interrupted.'

'Out of luck on that score, I'm afraid,' John said. 'They're triangulating the position of Sophie Lydon's mobile phone in the control room on campus. She called for a cab a while back and it looks like she'll be home in six to eight minutes.'

Greg glanced at his watch and saw that it was only half-past one. 'Didn't you tell me that the club was open till three?'

'It might well be,' John said. 'But you don't *have* to stay till closing time. Don't get discouraged, you've got all the equipment and we made plans for an interruption. Wait until Sophie goes to sleep, then use the gas and the needle, like with her mother.'

'I know the plan,' Greg said reluctantly, before tapping Andy on the shoulder. 'We'd better clear out.'

'Bloody Sophie,' Andy complained, as Greg snapped his phone shut. 'Would have been so much simpler if she'd waited till we were done.'

The two boys stuck all their stuff back inside their packs, hurried back into George's bedroom and threw their sleeping bags out on the floor. Andy was tense, but he couldn't help but see the funny side of Zhang's loud snoring.

It was less than ten minutes, but it felt like ages before Sophie's key rattled in the front door. She hurried down the hallway and used the downstairs toilet, before staggering upstairs, barefoot, with a bottle of Highland Spring water in one hand and her black heels hanging from the other.

Andy peeked out of the open doorway and saw that Sophie was drunk. Her head bopped to a tune in her mind and she was murmuring the line of a song to herself, over and over.

Instead of heading into her own room, Sophie ratcheted up the tension by poking her head inside George's open door. Greg and Andy closed their eyes and kept dead still.

'Ahh, the little geeks are sleeping,' she muttered to herself, before giggling.

Sophie started to back out, but noticed Andy's bag of M&Ms and a half-drunk can of beer on the carpet.

'Mummy won't be happy if she sees that, little brother,' Sophie grinned, before tilting the can to take a swig.

Andy and Greg weren't sure if the can was drugged or alcohol-free, but it didn't really matter because they needed to get on with the operation and couldn't wait two hours to put Sophie to sleep.

The beer was warm and flat, so Sophie spat it out in disgust. Greg opened one eye slightly, and saw Sophie's painted toenails on the carpet just a few centimetres away from his face.

'I'll teach you to mess with Mr Rabbit,' Sophie slurred.

Smiling mischievously, she poured Andy's M&Ms on to the carpet near the doorway and then crunched them under her heel. Once they were nicely mashed she tipped the remainder of the beer on to the brightly-coloured mess. Even if the liquid dried up by morning, a multicoloured stain and the distinctive smell of beer would remain.

‘Talk your way out of that one, Georgie boy,’ Sophie said quietly.

She gave her bum a jubilant wiggle and laughed drunkenly as she staggered out and grabbed the handle of her bedroom door, but it was still locked from earlier.

Greg and Andy realised the same thing at the same time: George’s mum had hidden the key so that the boys couldn’t get back into Sophie’s room. The only way Sophie could get into her room would be to ask her mum where the key was and if Sophie went into her mum’s room and found that she wouldn’t wake up she’d scream the house down.

9. PLANS

There was a lot at stake: a corrupt scientist, a centrifuge design worth millions, the chance to infiltrate the highest levels of the Dark Sun network and the opportunity to stop some crazed dictator or terrorist getting their hands on a nuclear bomb a few years down the line.

Greg and Andy hoped some scenario from their training would leap out with a solution, but all they felt was blind panic as Sophie headed drunkenly down the hallway towards her mother's bedroom.

'Try unlocking her door,' Greg whispered to Andy, as he darted out into the hallway. 'Hey Sophie. What's up?'

Sophie put a hand on her hip and looked at Greg as if he was something nasty on the bottom of her shoe. 'Piss off back to bed,' she tutted.

'I saw what you just did with the M&Ms,' Greg warned. 'I had one eye open the whole time.'

Sophie shrugged. 'My mum's never gonna believe you.'

'She might,' Greg said, as he stopped walking half a metre from Sophie. He didn't have a clue what to say, so he blurted the first thing that came into his head. 'I might forget all about it if you give us a quick snog.'

Sophie tutted incredulously. 'In your dreams, pervert.'

'Come on,' Greg said. He was about the same height as Sophie and he put his hand on her shoulder. 'Just a quick Frenchie.'

'EUGHH!' Sophie shuddered, before giving Greg a two-handed push. 'Touch me again and I'll knock your block off.'

Down the hallway, Andy turned his body so that Sophie couldn't see what he was up to as he worked on her door with the lock gun. Sophie felt intimidated as she backed up towards the chest near the staircase: Greg was only twelve, but he looked strong and she knew that he'd seen off two Year Ten boys.

Greg sensed Sophie's fear and took a step back. 'I'm only messing,' he said. 'I'm not gonna hurt you.'

'Ta-da!' Andy said, from down the hallway, throwing the lock gun back into George's room as he pushed Sophie's door open.

'Sorted,' Greg smiled, as he looked down the hallway. 'Now you don't need to wake your mum up.'

But the booze in Sophie's bloodstream made her paranoid and Greg's attempt at blackmail, followed by a

sudden eagerness to please, was totally creeping her out. The instant Greg turned to look back at Andy, she grabbed a vase off the cabinet at the top of the stairs.

Greg saw it move out the corner of his eye, but Sophie was fast and brought the vase down hard over the back of his head. It didn't break over his skull, but slipped from Sophie's grasp and shattered on the wooden acorn at the top of the stair rail.

'Keep your hands off me, weirdo,' Sophie screamed, as she followed up with a remarkably well-aimed Karate kick.

Even two years of the best combat training can't protect you when you're taken by surprise. Greg doubled over and groaned with pain as Sophie stormed down the hallway towards Andy.

'Where's the key?' Sophie demanded. 'I swear, if you guys have touched *anything* inside my room . . .'

'There's no key,' Andy said. 'I just know how to pick locks.'

'You're so full of it,' Sophie screamed. She felt confident after flattening Greg and gave Andy an almighty shove.

'Gimme my key,' Sophie shouted, as she launched a full fledged assault by trying to knee Andy in the stomach.

Unlike Greg, Andy saw it coming. He sidestepped Sophie's flying knee, which was a good job because she was hefty and it hit the passage wall so hard that it made a dent in the plasterboard.

As Sophie groaned and clutched her agonised knee,

Andy hooked his foot around Sophie's standing leg and swept it from under her. Andy stepped back, leaving Sophie glowering up at him from the floor.

'I was trying to help,' Andy said, trying to calm her down. 'Why don't you just go to bed, eh?'

But Sophie was having none of it and she lunged forward and tried wrapping her arms around Andy's waist. Meantime, Greg was back on his feet. He felt an excruciating pain as he took his first step, but he ignored it as he sprinted down the hallway and dived into George's bedroom.

Sophie was much heavier than Andy, but her Karate skills were limited to a few self-defence classes and Andy soon straddled her waist, pinning her arms to her side.

'Please calm down,' Andy said. 'You're drunk. You'll feel better if you get in bed and try going to sleep.'

'I want that key,' she screamed. 'I don't want you little idiots in my room.'

Greg burrowed down the side pocket of Andy's pack and grabbed one of the syringes. Out in the hall, Sophie spat and wriggled, even though Andy had her hopelessly pinned.

'Get off me,' she yelled.

'As soon as you calm down,' Andy yelled back. 'It's a misunderstanding. I haven't got any key, I swear.'

Greg crouched down behind Andy. He put the syringe between his teeth, before grabbing Sophie's foot and twisting it around so that it was flat to the floor.

'I'll kill you both,' Sophie screamed, now close to tears. 'Lemme go.'

Andy felt bad because Sophie was really upset, but she was going so crazy that he knew he'd only have to pin her again if he let her up.

Greg took the needle and jabbed it into the flesh between two toes on Sophie's right foot. She felt something, but Andy's torso blocked her view so she had no idea what it was.

It took half a minute for the sedative to start working. Sophie stopped thrashing about and her body started to relax.

'Thank Christ for that,' Andy gasped breathlessly, as he tried to stand up.

But the mixture of nightclub cocktails, panic and sedative hadn't done Sophie any good. As Andy lifted his weight off her stomach, she sat upright and spewed bright green vomit into his lap.

'Ahh shit!' Andy gasped, heaving at the smell of the puke dripping off his thighs as Sophie crashed back on to the carpet, dead to the world.

It's easy to choke when you're unconscious and Andy's first-aid training kicked in. He plunged his hand into Sophie's mouth and made sure that her airway was clear, before standing up and rolling her into the recovery position.

'Who'd want to be a spy?' Andy complained, clutching the strained muscles down his left side as he stepped back

from Sophie. 'How come you never see James Bond covered in some drunk bird's puke?'

Greg wasn't listening because he had his own problems. He leaned against the wall, inspecting his right heel. He'd ignored the pain when the adrenalin was flowing, but now realised that he'd sliced his foot open on a chunk of the broken vase. What's more, he'd left a trail of blood all along the hallway carpet and into George's room too.

Andy inspected the mess: blood, puke, beer, broken china, half a bag of crushed M&Ms and even a dent in the wall. 'George's old lady's gonna love this when she wakes up in the morning.'

Andy and Greg were both in pain, but they'd been through worse in CHERUB training and were both determined to pull off their mission.

Greg looked up and smiled at Andy, then mimicked the gruff voice of a CHERUB instructor. 'This is tough but cherubs are tougher,' he said.

Andy laughed, but that made the torn muscles in his stomach hurt even more.

'I'll take a shower and nick a clean pair of shorts from George's wardrobe,' he said. 'You find a bandage or something to stop your foot from bleeding. Once we're cleaned up, we'll drag Sophie on to her bed.'

'Fair enough,' Greg nodded. 'Then what?'

Andy glanced at his watch. 'It's only one forty-five. Nobody will be waking up for at least three hours, so we go back into Kurt's study, make the last forty-three revisions to

the centrifuge design and then turn in for whatever's left of the night.'

'Sounds like a plan to me,' Greg nodded, as he started hobbling towards the bathroom.

10. RAGE

Earthquakes are measured on the Richter scale, tornados on the Fujita scale, and there's an Explosivity Index for volcanoes. Andy and Greg weren't sure what scale was used for enraged mothers, but whatever it was George's mum hit the top level when she woke up at half-past seven that Saturday morning.

'Get your arses downstairs,' Dr Lydon screamed, as she yanked George out of a gentle slumber. Being gassed had left her with a bad headache, which made her mood even worse. 'Mind your feet, there's broken china all along the passageway.'

She'd seen the carnage in the hallway, but only learned of the busted hedge when she threw open George's window to clear out the smell of beer and pizza.

'No more sleepovers, ever,' she screamed. 'This is way beyond a joke.'

Apart from the hedge, everything had been fine when George and Zhang dropped off to sleep. George was stunned when he saw the state of the hallway.

‘It wasn’t me!’ he protested meekly.

Across the hall, Sophie emerged with her hair pointing in a thousand different directions, still dressed in her black dress and stockings, but now accessorised with dried-out vomit. ‘What’s all the noise?’ she moaned. ‘I need sleep.’

‘Sleep,’ Dr Lydon screamed, as George and Zhang scrambled down the stairs in a state of complete panic. ‘Young lady, nobody in this house is getting sleep until every speck of this mess is cleaned up.’

Sophie tutted. ‘Don’t blow your stack, Ma. It’s not my fault if the geekboys decided to get drunk.’

‘That was you!’ George’s mum shouted, pointing at the puke on the carpet. ‘It’s all down your dress. Get down to the kitchen and grab the cleaning stuff from under the sink.’

‘You’re so sexist, just because I’m a girl.’

‘Oh don’t you worry,’ Dr Lydon hissed. ‘George is doing his share of the cleaning too, and you’re both paying for the damage out of pocket money and birthday money. And that includes new carpets if we need ’em, so you’d better scrub hard.’

Down in the kitchen Zhang was helping himself to Coco Pops and seemed to find the whole scenario quite amusing. ‘Pity you’re not coming to China with me, Georgie,’ Zhang laughed. ‘It’s about the only place you’d be safe from that

crazed mother of yours.'

George was less concerned with Zhang's teasing than with the breach of trust by his new friend Greg.

'I've had loads of sleepovers before, and nothing like this has ever happened,' George yelled. 'What the hell were you guys playing at?'

Greg tried to act innocent. 'Your sister came home drunk and couldn't get into her room. Andy knows how to pick locks so he tried to help, but Sophie went psycho when we opened her door.'

George wasn't sure he believed this. 'What about the massive stain on my carpet? That must have been you guys, and why's Andy wearing a pair of my shorts?'

'Because your dumb-ass sister threw up all over me and then passed out,' Andy said.

At this point Sophie came storming in and started grabbing sponges, cloths and a bottle of carpet shampoo from under the sink. 'You're helping, George,' she steamed. 'None of this would have happened if it wasn't for your idiot mates.'

'You were drunk,' Greg shouted. 'You went crazy. You smashed a vase over my head.'

'Because you groped me,' Sophie shouted back.

'I didn't grope you! And we saw you rubbing beer and M&Ms into George's carpet to get him into trouble.'

'That's such a lie,' Sophie shrieked.

Greg knew he had her. 'Then why's the bottom of your foot all green and red?'

Sophie didn't move, but George closed in and demanded to look.

'Show me,' George yelled.

Sophie refused to lift her foot and when George tried to make her she smacked him around the back of the head. George immediately sank his teeth into his sister's arm and two seconds later the two siblings were rolling around on the floor between the washing machine and the dining table, beating the living daylights out of each other.

'STOP IT,' George's mum screamed, dragging Sophie off her brother as she stormed into the kitchen. 'I'm not joking! You're both cleaning that mess up.'

Sophie huffed and grabbed the cleaning stuff off the floor, but George tried a different tack and burst into tears.

'I'm sorry,' George howled. 'Please don't punish us. Please don't ruin the whole summer holidays.'

Dr Lydon was having none of that. 'You're thirteen years old,' she sneered. 'Act like it. You think I'm gonna fall for that little act?'

To emphasise her point Dr Lydon grabbed a plastic dustpan out of the cupboard and whacked her son across the back of the legs.

'Get upstairs and start helping your sister,' she roared.

It was only about the third time Dr Lydon had ever hit one of her kids and George was so stunned that he bolted upstairs like someone had shoved a rocket up his butt.

With her own kids out of the way, Dr Lydon turned and scowled at Greg, Andy and Zhang, who all sat around the

dining table. She was still holding the dustpan and clearly would have been happy to smack the pores off their faces. Unfortunately for her, parents are only allowed to be horrible to their own kids.

‘Call your parents,’ the doctor growled. ‘I want you three out of my house – and don’t ever expect to come back.’

George’s mum then turned on her heel and steamed up the staircase. ‘I don’t hear any scrubbing up there,’ she shouted.

Once she was out of earshot, Zhang rattled the cereal box on the table. ‘Anyone for Coco Pops?’ he asked cheerfully, as Andy pulled out his mobile to call John.

‘My uncle’s gonna meet us at the bottom of the road in ten minutes,’ Andy said, when the call finished. ‘We might as well go now, before the dragon lady comes back downstairs.’

‘Damned good sleepover if you ask me,’ Zhang smirked, as he topped up his bowl. ‘Normally I just kick George’s butt on the X-box until I get bored, then I hold him down and fart on his head. But having you guys here, trashing the house and everything, has made a real nice change.’

‘Maybe we’ll go to your house next time,’ Greg smiled, as he stretched his fist across the table and touched Zhang knuckle to knuckle.

‘Nice meeting you, Zhang,’ Andy said, as he did the same. ‘Have a good month in China.’

The two CHERUB agents grabbed their packs and headed out of the back doorway. Andy was hurting all

down his left side and Greg limped on his cut foot as they walked down the gravel driveway and turned on to the street.

‘I’ve got a massive egg on my head where Sophie hit me with the vase,’ Greg complained.

‘We’re like a couple of old men,’ Andy said. ‘But at least I can go back to calling you Rat now. This whole Greg thing is confusing.’

Greg had grown fond of Zhang and George and felt a touch sad. Now the mission was completed, CHERUB would invent some excuse why he had to move away and he’d never see either of them again. On the upside, Greg hadn’t been near his girlfriend Lauren in two months and there’d be a mad party on campus when he turned thirteen in a couple of weeks’ time.

‘Feel sorry for old George,’ Andy noted. ‘It wasn’t deliberate, but we totally stitched the poor guy up.’

‘He’ll survive,’ Greg laughed. ‘We got the job done and that’s what counts.’

EPILOGUE

March 6th 2008 – World Book Day

The grass was stiff with frost, but the kids walking across CHERUB campus were happy because they'd all been allowed out of lessons to attend the opening ceremony for a new building. The two-storey structure was an eco-friendly design, with straw-insulated walls and a dramatic, curved, glass frontage.

The little red-shirt kids showed their enthusiasm by running in circles outside the main entrance, jumping up and down and generally going nuts. Older kids were more reserved, hanging back with their mates and trying not to show any enthusiasm in case it didn't look cool.

Lauren Adams led one of the biggest groups. Her boyfriend Rat (AKA Greg) walked alongside with his arm around her back while Andy walked with Lauren's best friend Bethany. Lauren's older brother James was behind

with his best friend Bruce and a couple of his other mates bringing up the rear.

‘It’s freezing,’ Chairwoman Zara Asker said, once the crowd around the new building had settled. ‘So I’m gonna keep my speech short. We have a lot of special facilities on CHERUB campus, but our previous library was demolished to make way for the new mission control building. Today is World Book Day, so it gives me extra delight to officially declare the new CHERUB campus library open for business!’

There was a gentle bout of clapping as two of the smallest red-shirts walked up to a ribbon stretched across the main door, each holding one side of a pair of giant scissors. The crowd laughed as the ribbon refused to cut until it was held tight by two members of staff.

With more than two hundred people filtering through the doors, it was several minutes before Lauren and her friends made it inside.

‘Pretty swish,’ Lauren said, as she looked up at the library’s high-tech curved-oak ceiling and wavy glass frontage. There were desks and reference books on a gantry up above. At the far end was a refuge for little kids, filled with cushions and beanbags, in the middle of which was a five-metre-long pirate ship complete with a line of reading hammocks, an antique ship’s wheel and white sails with the CHERUB logo printed on them.

The opposite end was designed for older kids, with armchairs, sofas and tables. An espresso machine provided

coffee or frothy hot chocolate and there were baskets of muffins, croissants and fruit. Signs on the wall above the food said: *Please take a free drink and eat our freshly-baked muffins while you read. We can also offer fifty punishment laps to anyone who takes food or drink into the main library!*

Because of the sheer numbers of people, Lauren's group had to fight its way through just to get near the lounge area.

'It looks pretty swanky,' James Adams said, as he stared at the ceiling. 'But I've never really seen the point of books. I mean, if they're any good you just have to wait a couple of years and it gets turned into a movie.'

Lauren tutted. 'Just because the last book you read was about a hippo learning to tell the time.'

'And he never finished that,' Rat giggled. 'James still gets the big hand and the little hand mixed up.'

By this time, Lauren had reached the edge of the lounge area, but there was a horrendous queue to use the coffee machine, all the seats were taken and there were even kids perching on the coffee tables.

'It's only 'cos it's new,' Lauren's best friend Bethany noted. 'Come back in two days and there'll be four people in here.'

'It's really nice though,' Andy said thoughtfully. 'I mean, I'd rather sit here and read or do my homework than be alone in my room, and it looks like they've spent a bundle on new books.'

There was a loud crack and a couple of screams at the other end of the room. Everyone looked around and saw

one of the masts snapping on the pirate ship.

‘Timber!’ James shouted.

‘Well,’ Lauren sighed. ‘Whoever designed that clearly underestimated the destructive power of two dozen sugar-fuelled red-shirts.’

While chaos ensued at the opposite end, with staff rushing in to untangle yelling red-shirts from the sails on the broken mast, James spotted an empty table in the main part of the library and pointed towards it. ‘We’re never gonna get in the lounge. Let’s go sit over there.’

James and Lauren led the way, but Rat stopped following when he spotted a familiar face on the front of a newspaper.

‘Andy, check this out,’ Rat yelled, as he held up the picture on the front page. ‘Kurt Lydon.’

Andy came rushing over as Rat started reading the article:

BRITISH SCIENTIST AMONG TWENTY-TWO ARRESTED IN SWOOP ON NUKE TRAFFICKING NETWORK

A British nuclear engineer was one of twenty-two suspects arrested in Brussels at what police describe as the annual conference of a secretive nuclear trafficking network known as Dark Sun.

Fifty-four-year-old Kurt Lydon from Milton Keynes is a uranium enrichment expert who specialises in the design of gas centrifuges used to make fuel for atomic weapons.

The joint operation was organised by British, French, American and Belgian intelligence services and follows the explosion at a

prototype uranium enrichment facility in a remote area of Nigeria three weeks ago.

Lydon is thought to have been the mastermind behind the design of the Nigerian centrifuge. Despite the explosion, which was initially picked up by radiological monitoring equipment on board an American spy satellite, Nigerian authorities continue to distance themselves from the explosion and have described Dark Sun as a 'terrorist organisation with no connection to the democratically-elected government of Nigeria'.

An MI5 press officer described last night's arrests in Belgium as a 'colossal blow' to those countries who are seeking to buy nuclear technology.

As well as the twenty-two arrests, it is believed that the multinational two-year surveillance operation has also led to the recapture of stolen documents, nuclear material and the seizure of eighty million euros in bank accounts belonging to members of the Dark Sun network.

In Britain, police have sealed off Kurt Lydon's Milton Keynes home and uncovered a 'state of the art' computer-aided design facility from which Lydon is believed to have made designs for the Dark Sun network.

Lydon's wife, a surgeon at a Milton Keynes hospital, and his two teenaged children are staying with relatives. When contacted, Dr Lydon refused to make any comment on the search or the arrests.

Kerry's First Mission

James Adams was lucky: he got straight to the top rung of the ladder with his first mission. But Kerry Chang's first mission wasn't nearly as exciting . . .

James and Kyle were playing Tekken. James was on his bed, Kyle on the floor.

‘Come on, Nina . . .’ James screamed, tipping his body with the joypad.

The Playstation yelled out, ‘NINA WILLIAMS WINS.’

Kyle threw down his controller, as James punched the air. Kyle shrugged. ‘Like to see you do that to me in real life.’

‘Got my Karate blue belt yesterday,’ James said.

Kyle laughed. ‘Good, now you can mash up the eight-year-olds.’

Kerry banged on the door.

‘It’s open,’ James said.

Kerry walked in. ‘Hey Kyle, didn’t know you were here.’ She had a big grin on her face as she pulled a plastic card out of her pocket. ‘Look what I’ve got.’

‘What is it?’ James asked.

‘Card for the eighth floor,’ Kyle explained. ‘Mission Preparation. It means Kerry’s got a mission.’

James smiled. ‘Cool. When you going?’

‘Dunno,’ Kerry shrugged. ‘I see the Mission Controller for my briefing tomorrow morning.’

‘Who you got?’ Kyle asked.

‘Dennis King.’

‘DK, he’s good,’ Kyle said. ‘Best one to get. Nice old guy, handles all the routine stuff.’

‘Anyway,’ Kerry said, ‘I better go to bed. It’s gone eleven. I just had to tell someone. I’m really nervous.’

‘Before you go, Kerry,’ Kyle said, ‘I bought a big bag of fake stuff back from Manila. There’s Lacoste shirts for four quid. Nike shorts, fiver. It’s all in my room. You want a look?’

Kerry shook her head. ‘Nah. I bought some of that fake stuff off someone before. Put it through the wash once and it shrank down to about half the size.’

‘It’s good stuff,’ Kyle said defensively. ‘Most of it comes out the same factories that make the real ones.’

‘I’ll pass,’ Kerry said. ‘I’m going to bed now anyway. See you at breakfast, I expect.’

‘Night, Kerry,’ James called. ‘Good luck tomorrow.’

Kerry headed out.

‘All that stuff you sold me better not bloody shrink, Kyle,’ James said.

*

First impressions count. Doing well on your first mission is important: if you get a couple of easy missions in without problems, you soon get moved up to the interesting stuff.

Kerry couldn't sleep. She was awake at 6 a.m. and went for breakfast, but she couldn't get her head straight. Her guts were in her mouth. She flicked through a morning paper, but her mind wasn't on it. There were three hours to kill before the briefing.

Kerry went back up to her room. She brushed her teeth for the second time and combed what there was of her hair. She hadn't realised how long it would take to grow back when she shaved her head for basic training.

There was a rule that you were supposed to tuck your T-shirt in. Nobody ever enforced it, but Kerry thought she ought to tuck it in for her first mission briefing. Best to look extra smart. She was sure there was something important she'd forgotten, but there couldn't be - she'd been through everything five hundred times.

She looked at her watch. Still over an hour and a half to wait. She hated the way time lasts forever when you're waiting for something.

*

Kerry got out of the lift on the eighth floor. Every door had a notice warning of dire punishments for anyone found in the wrong room. All except Dennis King's door, which was at the end of the corridor, wide open.

Dennis King was at his desk. Dyed hair, combed back

and greased down, thick glasses with black frames. He was on the phone, sounding pretty frantic about a missing e-mail.

Three boys sat opposite King. One of them was Josh Clarke. He was fifteen, and used to be Kerry's Spanish tutor when she first got to CHERUB.

Josh whispered so he didn't blot out King's phone call. 'Hey, Kerry. Congratulations on passing basic. First mission?'

Kerry nodded.

'Nervous?'

Kerry shook her head. 'Not really.'

Dennis King slammed the phone down. 'The Swiss. They're all idiots.' He looked at Kerry. 'You must be Chung.'

'Chang,' Kerry said. 'Kerry Chang.'

Dennis King reached between the kids sitting at his desk and shook Kerry's hand. 'Nice to meet you, Kerry. Call me DK, everybody does. Everything you need is in the box in drawer sixteen. Read the briefing, talk to Josh if you have any questions. Nice easy first mission for you.'

Kerry found drawer sixteen and lifted out a plastic box. It contained the mission briefing, her passport, a set of airline tickets, a mobile phone and a metal tube about sixty centimetres long. The tube had a yellow warning triangle with *DANGER: HIGH EXPLOSIVE* written beneath it.

**** CLASSIFIED ****

**MISSION BRIEFING FOR KERRY CHANG
STANDARD FAA COMPLIANCE MISSION**

NUMBER 1037 (March 2004)

DO NOT REMOVE FROM ROOM 812

DO NOT COPY OR MAKE NOTES

FAA compliance missions are part of an agreement between the Federal Aviation Authority in the United States and the Civil Aviation Authority in the United Kingdom.

Every year the British Government makes 120 official attempts to breach American airport security, in an ongoing programme to detect security lapses. The Americans make the same number of attempts to breach British airport security.

Each attempt is slightly different. In this instance, an unaccompanied child, provided by CHERUB, will try to breach security at Chicago O'Hare airport. The child will be carrying an M72 Light Anti Tank rocket. This is a large item and the probability of detection is high.

The child will be waved through British airport security before boarding his/her flight. In the event the weapon is detected in the United States, the child must produce the diplomatic documentation provided and ask to speak to the Airport Security Manager. If the weapon is not detected, the child must proceed through security to meet an FBI liaison officer who will be waiting in the airport lobby.

The child will be allowed to stay in Chicago overnight, and have a day's accompanied sightseeing in the city before flying back to London in the evening.

Kerry was a bit disappointed. The mission didn't give her much opportunity to prove herself. All she had to do was sit on a plane and walk through security. Still, it was better than no mission at all, and she'd always wanted to go to America, even if it was only for a day and a bit.

She felt important arriving at Heathrow airport and getting waved through security. Her seat was in the front row of economy class. There were two snotty little brothers sitting beside her, about six or seven years old. Both kids had huge yellow badges pinned on their T-shirts. The badges had a cartoon picture of an aeroplane and *Unaccompanied Child Please Look After Me!!!* written underneath.

*

'Drinks?' the stewardess asked.

'Coke, please,' Kerry said.

'You're not wearing your badge,' the stewardess pointed out.

'I don't need one,' Kerry said. 'I'm nearly twelve.'

The stewardess took no notice and pinned a giant badge on Kerry's tracksuit. It was the most embarrassing thing she'd ever worn.

'Don't pull it off again, young lady. There are rules.'

Kerry couldn't be bothered telling the stewardess she'd never had a badge in the first place. With some people you just know you'll never win an argument.

When the meals came round, Kerry got chicken nuggets shaped like teddies and Dairy Lea slices. 'Can't I have an adult meal?'

‘I’m sorry, we only have one meal per passenger. Did you want the play pack? It’s got crayons and join-the-dots pictures.’

Kerry knew that if she snapped her plastic fork in two and got a sharp edge, she could do some serious damage to the stewardess. The thought made her smile.

‘Not to worry,’ the stewardess said. ‘You’ll probably want a little nap soon anyway.’

*

A couple of hours into the flight a good-looking kid walked past Kerry on the way to the toilet. He was twelve or thirteen, and he must have lived somewhere hot because he was all tanned. Kerry could imagine him on a beach somewhere, running around with a surfboard under his arm.

The kid gave Kerry a smile as he walked past. Maybe he was flirting with her? She decided to get behind him in the queue for the toilet. They might have a conversation, and at least it would be a break from the two brats sitting next to her. They’d been screaming over a Gameboy since before take-off.

Kerry joined the queue next to the tanned kid and his younger brother. She looked at her watch. ‘Boring flight,’ she said. ‘Still six hours to go.’

The kid seemed surprised Kerry had spoken to him. ‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘I just love that badge.’

The brothers burst out laughing. A couple of adults in the queue started laughing as well. Kerry turned bright red and stormed back to her seat.

It was the worst flight ever.

Kerry's backpack set off a metal detector in the immigration hall. She stopped walking. The security guard smiled and waved Kerry on.

'Don't worry, miss. Just your belt buckle or something, does it all the time.'

She walked out into Arrivals. A uniformed FBI agent was holding up a sign with Kerry's name on.

'Welcome to the United States. Name's Sue O'Banyon. Better take you up to my office.'

Sue took Kerry to a small office behind the check-in desks. Kerry unzipped her backpack and handed Sue the M72 rocket launcher.

Sue laughed. 'What a beauty. You could take out half the airport with one of those. Didn't you set off the metal detector?'

'Yeah, but I got waved through. Guy said it was probably my belt buckle.'

'He's gonna be looking for a new job real soon. This never should have got in. There's a scale on the metal detector, this amount of metal should send it into red. And there's sniffers that can detect explosives, and there's an X-ray of every checked bag as it comes off the plane. It's very disappointing that you made it here.'

Kerry nodded, but she was pleased she'd got through. 'Can I get a shower or something?' she asked.

'Sure, you're staying with me tonight. We can get pizza or something, and tomorrow I'll take you to see the sights.

Go on the river, see all the skyscrapers. You got any spending money?’

‘They gave me a hundred and fifty dollars. But I have to give back whatever I don’t spend, so I figured I’ll try and buy some new trainers. These ones I’m wearing are past it. Plus my friend James says you get almond M&Ms over here, and you don’t get them in Britain. They’re his favourite kind, so he wants me to get him some.’

‘Chicago is *the* place to shop, Kerry. I’ll take you to Michigan Avenue. Biggest shopping street in America.’

CHERUB at Christmas

It's Christmas Eve, and James is heading back
to his old neighbourhood . . .

1. ALAN

Friday 24 December, 10.37 a.m.

James Adams knew exactly what he'd see as he turned the corner into Holloway Villas: six-storey housing blocks, built around a courtyard, with a vandalised playground in the centre and the stench of rubbish as you walked past by the giant steel bins.

The only thing James didn't recognise was the graffiti. PIG41 was the new spray-can supremo on James' old estate. His bright red tag adorned walls, doors, billboards and even the pavement itself.

'You OK, James?' Bruce asked as the two boys walked side by side.

'Yeah,' James said, swallowing a lump in his throat.

But he wasn't OK. Memories of the night when his mother died fourteen months earlier still had the power to sting.

Bruce handed James a tissue. 'It's a bit crumpled, but there's no snot on it.'

'Ta,' James said, feeling a little embarrassed as he took it and rubbed his eyes. 'I don't know . . . I mean . . . I just remembered the ambulance men carrying my mum out and Lauren holding my wrist. It all came flooding back.'

'Nothing to be ashamed of,' Bruce said. 'Nobody's gonna get over their mum dying in any sort of hurry.'

The boys headed up a concrete staircase. A bitter gust of wind hit them as they stepped out on to the second-floor balcony. James' sadness was replaced by nostalgia as he remembered his mum yelling down off the balcony with a finger drumming against the face of her watch.

'Eight o'clock, James. You'll catch hell if I have to come down there and get you.'

James stopped when he reached the living-room window of his old flat.

'Looks like a young couple moved in,' he said as he peered in. 'It's all been done up. Wood floors and that.'

Bruce nodded. 'Looks pretty smart.'

'It does,' James said. 'But I wouldn't have paid two hundred and twenty grand to live there.'

'How much!' Bruce gasped.

James grinned. 'Property prices round here are insane. Mum owned the flat and her mortgage was paid off by the life insurance when she died. Me and Lauren get to share the loot when we leave CHERUB.'

'You're so jammy,' Bruce said. 'My parents died when I

was a baby and they owed three grand on their Barclaycard.'

James stepped away from the window and rang the bell of a flat six doors further along the balcony. He waited half a minute, but there was no answer.

'We came all this way and the geezer's out,' Bruce spluttered angrily. 'I'm gonna kick his arse . . .'

'Keep your wig on,' James grinned. 'This isn't Alan's place. My old mate Sam lives here. I was just gonna say *hi*, but it looks like he's out. Alan lives in the one up the end; he'll be waiting for me.'

When the door of Alan's flat opened, James got engulfed in the arms of a grubby-looking man with a mass of black body hair down his arms and a giant beer gut.

'Hey, Alan,' James grinned, pleased to be reacquainted with his friend, but slightly less pleased at being hugged into a white vest that smelled of three-tins-for-a-pound body spray from Holloway market.

'You look good,' Alan gasped. 'Quite a handsome young man now. You've got taller and thinned out. Come inside. Where's the little lady?'

'Lauren couldn't come. She's back at our foster home with a stinking cold,' James lied. 'This is my mate, Bruce. He's gonna help me carry all the gear home.'

Alan led them down the hallway. 'That's a shame, I was looking forward to seeing Lauren. I hope being sick doesn't spoil her Christmas.'

'I reckon she's over the worst of it,' James said, as the boys stepped into Alan's living-room.

There was no space to sit because the entire room was stacked up with bags of stolen items. Only the tip of the Christmas tree was visible behind a pile of X-Boxes and PS2s.

Alan had been James' mum's number two before she died and now he'd taken over her shoplifting racket. James had grown up around the business and found it hard to see shoplifting as all that wrong, though he knew he ought to. He also knew how it should operate and wasn't impressed by what he saw.

'You want to be careful, Alan,' he said, as he spun around looking at the stacks of stolen goods. 'My mum would never have anything freshly nicked in our flat. If the police see all this lot, they'll lock you up and throw away the key.'

'I know, I know,' Alan said defensively, sounding like he'd already heard this advice from other quarters. 'But you know how mental everything gets at this time of year, James. I've got so much coming and going. I've got two lock-ups piled up with stuff. There's nowhere else to put it all.'

James nodded. 'Mum used to tell everyone to get their orders in early, but it still went mad every Christmas.'

'You boys look half-frozen, would you like a hot drink? All the stuff you ordered is in those three bags over by the door.'

While Alan headed out to make tea, James dragged the bags into the centre of the room to check that everything he'd ordered was there. It wasn't that he didn't trust Alan,

but with the place in a state of chaos he could easily have made a mistake.

Bruce read down the list. 'Burnout three, five copies, Gabrielle's make-up, PDA for Kerry, Lauren's clothes, my extra large nunchakus, Predator footy boots size six, Dior perfume set for Kerry, FCUK stuff for Bethany, two pairs of . . .'

The bags contained most of the stuff James, Bruce and their pals were getting each other for Christmas.

When Alan came back holding two steaming mugs, James had a roll of fifty-pound notes in his hand.

'Half the shop price for this lot comes to five hundred and eighty quid,' James said. 'It's all there.'

Alan grabbed the money and started counting it. Every seat in the room was covered in shoplifted goodies, so James and Bruce had to squat down on the carpet with their hot tea.

'So, what are you up to over Christmas?' James asked.

Alan shrugged. 'Gonna visit my sister and her 'orrible offspring, same as always.'

'Cool,' James nodded.

Alan held out three hundred from the money James had just handed him. 'There you go boy, split that lot with your sister.'

James waved his hands in front of his face. 'Don't be daft, Alan. I told you I had the money to pay for this stuff when I rang up. I'm not asking for charity.'

Alan smiled. 'James, your mother was very good to me

over the years. She would have wanted me to look out for Lauren and you.'

'No,' James grinned, but Alan dropped the money in his lap.

Bruce laughed and made a grab for it. 'I'll have it if you don't want it.'

James reluctantly picked the money off the carpet. 'You're a good geezer, Al,' he grinned. 'My nan always said she couldn't understand how my mum ended up marrying that idiot Ron when you lived just down the balcony.'

Alan burst out laughing. 'Old missus Choke, I haven't thought about her in ages. She was a tough old bird, your grandmother. Didn't stand any nonsense from anyone.'

James clambered off the carpet and reached out to shake Alan's hand. 'I'm gonna take a piss, then we'd better be going back to cam— erm, to our foster home.'

'Oh,' Alan said, sounding a touch disappointed. 'You can stay a while if you want. I'll take you down the shops and get you both McDonald's or something.'

James shook his head. 'Thanks for the offer, Alan, but we've got a fair journey back and you know how mental the trains get if you leave it till last thing on Christmas Eve.'

2. MUDDY PUPS

12.08 p.m.

In the main building on CHERUB campus the bell had rung for the end of lessons and the kids were free until the second of January. Some had gone off to the dojo to watch the Christmas Karate tournament, some had gone out to play football, but most kids headed off to their rooms to dump their schoolbooks and change out of CHERUB uniform into normal clothes.

Everyone was in high spirits at the prospect of a week-long break, except for eight kids inside the basic training compound and two others who were serving a punishment over on the far side of campus. Kyle Blueman was being punished for smoking cannabis, Lauren Adams for battering CHERUB's head training instructor with a spade.

*

Lauren lost her footing as she clambered up the side of the

ditch. Her wellington slid down the muddy embankment and she collapsed forward, unable to save herself because she was holding a bundle of branches in her arms.

Kyle ploughed through the thirty-centimetre deep sludge and put out his hand. Lauren could feel cold water trickling into her waterproof trousers as Kyle hauled her up.

‘Are you OK?’ he asked.

‘I’m so knackered,’ Lauren said, breaking into a yawn before glancing at her watch. ‘And there’s still five hours to go.’

She was a picture of misery as chunks of mud slid down the front of her waterproof jacket. She gathered up the branches she’d dropped around her feet and began lobbing them up on to the embankment a couple at a time.

Kyle pulled his shovel out of the slurry. He scooped up a load of soggy leaves and dropped them into a heavy plastic sack.

‘At least we’ve got the next two days off,’ he said.

Lauren nodded. ‘Yeah, but you can forget about enjoying Christmas. I’m just gonna go to bed and sleep. I don’t even care about my presents.’

Kyle felt sorry for Lauren. They’d landed the same punishment, but it was tougher on ten-year-old Lauren than on Kyle, who’d turned fifteen a week earlier.

‘I reckon we deserve a break,’ he said.

‘It’s not one o’clock yet.’

Kyle turned backwards and looked at the section of cleared ditch behind them. ‘I think we’ve done a good

morning's graft, don't you? I dug out all those leaves, you stripped down all the branches and chopped up that tree trunk.'

Lauren smiled in agreement. 'Maybe you're right. There's nobody around and we deserve an extra fifteen minutes' lunch after all that.'

They were in a particularly deep section of ditch, so Kyle clambered up the muddy embankment first, then gave Lauren a hand up so that she didn't slip over again. The dining hall was over a kilometre away and they wouldn't have been allowed in without stripping off their overalls and washing, so packed lunch was their only practical option. Lauren slumped down with her back against a tree, pulled off her gloves and wiped her muddy fingers on a damp flannel.

She grabbed a flask filled with hot soup from her backpack, poured soup into the lid and dipped in a hunk of bread. The extra-thick soup was made in the CHERUB kitchens and Lauren was starving. Kyle dunked his with a ham and tomato roll as a man's voice came out of the trees.

'What's this then, slacking off?'

Ken Crane was the CHERUB groundskeeper supervising Lauren and Kyle's punishment. Lauren thought about jumping up and pretending to work, but Ken was close by and he was a decent bloke as long as you didn't muck him about.

'Is it early, Ken?' Kyle said weakly. 'My watch must be fast.'

'Must be,' Ken smirked, as he squelched up to the edge of the ditch and looked at what they'd done.

'Not a bad show,' he nodded. 'You two make a good little team. I'll be sorry when your punishments are over.'

Lauren smiled. 'We certainly won't be.'

Ken laughed. 'Anyhow, I came over here to tell you both to scoot off.'

Kyle grinned. 'You serious?'

'Yep. Take your tools back to the shed and hose the mud off your boots and overalls. I'll pick up the branches and sacks of leaves with the tractor later on.'

Lauren interrupted. 'But Dr McAfferty's very strict. He said—'

'Do I look concerned about Dr McAfferty? It's Christmas Eve and I'm telling you to buzz off. Go and have a good Christmas and I'll see you back here in a few days.'

Lauren chucked away the last of her soup, screwed the lid back on her flask and stood up, grinning.

'Thank you, Mr Crane. Have a good Christmas yourself.'

3. A FINAL LOOK

12.40 p.m.

Ancient memories washed over Marcus Thompson as the taxi wound down the road leading to CHERUB campus' single entrance.

In particular, he recalled a summer's day nearly fifty years earlier. Back then he was a newly qualified CHERUB agent, walking along this very stretch of road in plimsolls and cotton shorts, with a couple of young pals for company. They were heading for a nearby lake that was the closest thing CHERUB had to a swimming pool in those days.

Everything, except the twisting outline of the road itself, had changed. The dirt track that got churned into mud every winter had been widened, tarmacked and fitted with street lighting. The small farms that had surrounded campus back then had gradually been bought up. Where Marcus remembered a view over open fields, there was now

a ten-metre breeze-block wall, topped with razor wire and CCTV cameras. Every twenty metres there was a yellow warning sign:

DO NOT ENTER

*Any attempt to climb this wall
may be met with deadly force.*

By Order, Ministry of Defence.

‘Gives me the spooks this road,’ the taxi driver said, as he took a sharp bend slightly too fast, pressing Marcus against the car door. ‘It’s like the X-files, or Area 51, or something. Everyone goes on about it in the pubs and that. I even know a couple of ladies who work in the kitchens, but they never say a word about what goes on inside.’

Marcus allowed himself to smile. Fifty years hadn’t changed some things: the locals still wanted to know what CHERUB campus was all about.

‘It’s probably better you don’t know,’ Marcus said.

The driver laughed. ‘You’re probably right, old-timer. I’ll give you lot one thing though, this place is good for business. The run between here and the station is one of my biggest earners.’

The taxi took another bend uncomfortably fast, and when they were round it the metal gates of CHERUB campus were visible. The cab driver pulled up in front of the gate and walked around to the boot to grab Marcus’ suitcase. His elderly passenger was struggling to get out of

the car, but turned down an offer of help.

‘That’s six-eighty, guv.’

As Marcus fumbled in his wallet, the chairman of CHERUB emerged through a riveted door at the side of the main gate. He spread his arms out wide and the two men hugged.

‘My god,’ Mac shouted. ‘Marcus Thompson, I haven’t seen you since . . .’

Marcus smiled. ‘I was here for the fortieth reunion, back in eighty-six.’

*

13.32 p.m.

Gabrielle O’Brien knocked on the Chairman’s door and got called in immediately.

Dr McAfferty – commonly known as Mac – sat at his fireplace holding a tumbler of whiskey. Gabrielle didn’t recognise the black man sitting opposite. He had a few wisps of grey hair on his head and a can of Heineken in his hand. He turned to Gabrielle and gave her a gap-toothed smile.

‘By gum, you’re beautiful,’ Marcus grinned, standing as quickly as his frail body would allow and kissing the back of Gabrielle’s hand. ‘Will you marry me?’

Gabrielle backed off uneasily, sensing that the man was a little drunk. ‘I think thirteen is a bit young to be getting married.’

‘Thirteen, but you’re a giant,’ Marcus smiled. ‘You look at least fifteen. Is it me or are you kids getting bigger these days?’

Mac laughed. 'They're bigger. That's why they eat so much and grow through so many clothes. I got a letter from the Intelligence Services Procurement department last week. They wanted to know why I'd spent over sixty thousand pounds on footwear over the last year.'

'Sixty grand,' Marcus spluttered, shocked. 'In our day we had hob nail boots and white plimsolls that got handed from one kid to the next till the soles wore through.'

'Tell me about it,' Mac grinned. 'The combat boots these kids wear for training are a hundred and twenty pounds a throw. And every kid these days *has* to have designer gear for their casual clothes.'

Gabrielle smiled guiltily. 'Well, kids on the outside wear that stuff and we have to blend in when we're on missions.'

Dr McAfferty nodded. 'Gabrielle, Marcus here is one of my oldest and dearest friends. We were both CHERUB agents together back in the nineteen-fifties. He's been living in Barbados for most of the last twenty years, but he's caught the nostalgia bug and asked if he could visit us for Christmas. I'm afraid I have some paperwork to finish up before the holidays, so I'd like you to treat Marcus to the grand tour. Show him all our new buildings and facilities. Access all areas, I think we can trust him.'

Gabrielle would have preferred to hang out with her mates, but Marcus seemed a nice enough old bloke and you can't really say no when the Chairman asks a favour.

As Marcus walked slowly towards the door, Mac whispered in Gabrielle's ear. 'I appreciate this, Gabrielle.'

Take Marcus round in one of the golf buggies, he's a very sick man and I'm led to believe that he's only got a few months to live. He just wants to take a last look at the place where he spent most of his childhood.'

4. GMT + 8

4.03 p.m. UK time

It was past midnight in Tokyo, but Kerry was jet-lagged and couldn't get to sleep. She threw back a corner of her bedding and looked at the digital clock on the bedside table: 00:03, Christmas Day.

It was a miserable feeling, being trapped in a hotel room with only a snoring mission controller for company, but Kerry's first big solo mission was a golden opportunity to establish her reputation amongst the elite corps of recently qualified CHERUB agents.

She'd spent weeks polishing up her Japanese language skills, hours reading mission briefings and detailed texts on the Yakuza. She wanted to succeed more than anything else in the world; it was just a shame that she couldn't have flown out a couple of days later and spent Christmas with her friends on campus.

Kerry closed her eyes again, but quickly realised that she wasn't even close to feeling sleepy. It might have been dark outside, but as far as her body clock was concerned it was four in the afternoon. She stepped up to the window and opened a tiny crack in the curtains. The room was fourteen storeys up and the streets below glimmered under a mixture of streetlight and neon signs. Flocks of ant-sized people moved along the pavements and the traffic remained solid, even at this early hour of the morning.

If the room had been larger, Kerry might have flicked on the TV or bedside light to read by, but the two single beds were separated by less than half a metre and she didn't want to disturb her mission controller. Instead, she stepped into the bathroom and pushed the door closed quietly before turning on the light.

The cramped space had a slight disinfectant smell. There was barely enough room between the shower, toilet and sink to take two steps. She sat on the toilet lid and noticed that there was a telephone attached to the wall beside the tissue holder.

*

James had been picked up at the station nearest to campus by mini-bus, along with a bunch of other cherubs who'd managed to wangle Christmas Eve as a shopping day. He was waiting for the lift up to his sixth-floor room, holding two big bags of presents, when his mobile rang.

He flipped it open. 'James Adams, super stud speaking.'
'Super *what?*' Kerry giggled. 'Super idiot more like.'

‘How was the flight?’

‘Ten hours, economy class. Two days before Christmas, so you can imagine. Heathrow airport was a nuthouse, the plane was packed. It’s already Christmas Day over here. Well, we’re ten minutes into it anyway.’

‘I’ve just been down to London with Bruce,’ James explained as he stepped into the lift. ‘I’m holding your present in my hands actually.’

‘You know this is a really long mission, James. It’s gonna be at least April before I get to open it.’

‘I’ll tell you what it is if you like.’

Kerry thought for a second. ‘Nah, it’ll be a nice surprise when I get back.’

‘I just hope I’m not on a mission when you do. We could end up not seeing each other for yonks.’

The lift doors opened at the sixth floor and James stepped out.

‘Well,’ Kerry said, ‘I only rang to wish you a happy Christmas and I bet this call is costing a packet. I’d better go.’

James made a kissing noise. ‘I wish you were here, Kerry. Christmas is gonna suck without you around.’

‘I’ll miss you too,’ Kerry said sadly. ‘Goodbye, James. Tell Gabrielle and everyone else that I wished them a happy Christmas.’

James flipped his phone shut and put the two bags down on the carpet outside his room.

Bruce grinned at James and blew him a kiss. ‘Bye bye

Kerry, *smooch*,' he grinned, mocking James' voice. 'I miss you sweetie cakes, *smoochy, smoochy*.'

James tutted as he pulled his room key out of his tracksuit bottoms. 'Shut up. Just 'cos you haven't got a girlfriend. You'd better help us sort out all this shopping. I've got tons of wrapping-up to do.'

As James headed into his room, he heard his name being yelled out from Meryl Spencer's office at the end of the corridor. He knew it couldn't be Meryl herself. She was at a TV studio in London.

He realised it was her assistant, Christine.

'James Adams,' Christine repeated angrily. 'Get your sorry butt down here *right now*!'

'Crap,' James muttered to Bruce under his breath.

'Busted,' Bruce giggled.

'Clearly,' James shrugged. 'I'm just trying to think what I've done.'

He pushed his shopping into the doorway and headed towards the slender woman standing at the end of the corridor.

'Into the office, James,' Christine said tersely.

James headed in, Christine followed. The door clattered shut as she sat down behind Meryl's desk.

'James, Meryl allowed you to take a Christmas shopping day on the understanding that you were up to date with all of your homework.'

'Yeah,' James nodded. 'I am.'

'I had Mr Grwgowski up here looking for you earlier,

James. He doesn't seem to agree with you.'

James looked a little shocked. 'Oh.'

'A short essay, written in Russian, on the history of Moscow. I believe it was due to be handed in more than a week ago.'

'Yeah, um . . . I forgot.'

'James, if I had a pound for every time you've conveniently forgotten a homework assignment . . .'

'Sorry, Chris, but I'll do it right after Christmas, I swear.'

Christine slowly shook her head. 'Oh no, you won't. You're going to do it right now.'

'But . . .'

Christine pointed at a small wooden desk in the corner of her office. It was a really old-fashioned one with an inkwell built in and a place for storing your books underneath.

'James, I took the liberty of going into your room while you were out. I found your Russian books and your pencil case and put them on that desk ready for you to start work.'

'But . . .'

'No ifs, no buts, James. You're going to sit at that desk and complete that homework while I'm sitting here watching you.'

'It's gonna take hours though,' James whined. 'It's Christmas.'

'Then you'd better get a move on. As far as you're concerned, Christmas doesn't start until you've finished that assignment.'

James reluctantly slumped down at the desk. 'So much for the season of goodwill,' he said miserably as he opened his textbook. 'Can I at least watch Meryl when she's on TV later?'

Christine looked at her watch. 'James, her show's not on for another two and a half hours. If you get your act together you'll be finished long before then.'

5. CELEBRITY MADNESS

6.58 p.m.

It had been more than five years since Meryl Spencer appeared on television. She'd always had a reclusive streak and rarely made public appearances, even when she was at the pinnacle of her career. She'd told everyone that she'd accepted the offer to appear on the show because it was for charity, but she was also quite flattered that people still remembered her more than six years after retiring from athletics.

Meryl felt self-conscious, sitting behind a neon-lit counter with two other sports personalities for company. She had a buzzer and bank of small screens in front of her. The hot studio lights were pushing up beads of sweat on her neck and a young man leaned in and dabbed them away with a cotton wool ball.

A roar came up from the audience as the warm-up

comedian rounded off his spiel.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, let’s have a big cheer for tonight’s host. England’s all-time number one international goal scorer and winner of three premiership titles, Martin Monroe.’

The balding ex-footballer stepped in from stage left in a snappy suit as the audience began cheering. He signed a couple of autographs, before stepping on to the set and taking his seat at the centre of the stage. Meryl heard the director speaking into her earpiece.

‘OK people, look happy. Remember, you’re going out live to seven million people so let’s keep it sweet.’

Meryl’s face got another dab with the cotton wool and her glass of water was refilled while the opening titles rolled. The audience went wild as the camera panned in on the host.

‘Hello and welcome to this special Christmas charity edition of Sports Quiz. Two teams of three contestants battling it out and, for one night only, every correct answer wins five hundred pounds for charity. Joining our regular team captains Rhys and Susan tonight are four outstanding sports personalities from around the world.’

Meryl stifled a gasp as her face filled up the monitor. *Seven million people.*

Monroe continued. ‘Joining us tonight in a rare public appearance, Meryl Spencer.’

The audience broke out into another bout of wild clapping.

'Meryl was the red-hot favourite for a one-hundred-metre gold at the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona but tragically pulled up in her heat. But it all came right in Atlanta in 1996.'

The monitor cut away from Meryl's face to a scene recorded in the Olympic stadium eight years earlier. A close shot opened out to show a line of muscular women on the starting blocks. The pistol fired and the women sprang up. Meryl was first out of the blocks and continued powering away from the field, passing the finish line ten and a half seconds later, three strides clear of the field.

The commentator's voice, '*The Jamaican simply blew the rest of that field away . . .*'

Meryl had seen footage of her victory thousands of times before, but she still looked proud as the director cut back to her face.

'Meryl,' the genial host grinned. 'That run still stands as the Olympic record and as the third fastest hundred metres ever run by a woman. A truly phenomenal achievement.'

Meryl nodded. 'Thank you, Martin.'

Martin smiled sneakily as the audience clapped. 'And we understand you went to Japan and made some TV commercials shortly after your victory?'

Meryl covered her face with her hands and shrieked with nervous laughter. 'Oh no, you're not going to show *that*.'

Meryl knew they *were* going to show *that*, because they'd done it in rehearsals a few hours earlier. She heard the director's voice in her earpiece.

'That's a great expression, Meryl. You look really

shocked, now give the audience a smile just to make it known that you're not really upset – that's perfect.'

*

There were more than a hundred and fifty kids gathered in the CHERUB dining hall watching Meryl Spencer dressed in a chicken suit being fired out of a cannon, while an array of incomprehensible Japanese slogans flashed across the screen.

James was laughing as hard as anyone else. 'Oh my god!' he snorted. 'I wonder how much they paid her to do that.'

Kyle replied, 'Meryl did OK, judging by the gold Rolex and that fancy Mercedes she drives.'

James and Kyle sat around their usual table with Bruce, Callum, Connor, Gabrielle and Marcus Thompson. The sixty-two-year-old had turned down the opportunity to join Mac in the staff dining-room. He'd downed a bottle of red wine while he struggled through a plate of fish and chips, and entertained the kids with anecdotes from the early days of CHERUB.

Marcus told the kids that he enjoyed their company because they made him feel young. The kids didn't mind because most of the stories were funny and Marcus was happy to dish out dirt on some of CHERUB's most senior staff.

6. LESSONS ABOUT DRIVING AND ALCOHOL

When Sport Quiz ended, the kids had to clear out of the dining-hall so that the kitchen staff could come in and set everything up for Christmas dinner the next day.

‘What are we gonna do now?’ Kyle asked. ‘Someone upstairs must be having a party or something.’

James shrugged. ‘I’d better go back to my room, I’ve got loads of presents to wrap.’

‘I’m taking Marcus over to the Junior Block,’ said Gabrielle. ‘The little kids are doing a nativity play.’

‘I’m up for that,’ Bruce nodded. ‘Remember last year when that little shepherdess fell off the stage?’

Kyle nodded. ‘I felt sorry for her, but it was hilarious.’

Everyone else decided to go over and see the play. ‘Come on, James,’ Connor said. ‘Let’s all stick together, it’s Christmas Eve.’

‘I can’t. I’ve got presents to wrap.’

‘Who cares?’ Kyle said. ‘They’re all gonna be unwrapped in a few hours anyway.’

James had bought labels and wrapping paper in town the previous weekend, but the more he thought about it, the more he realised that sitting on his floor with scissors and tape wasn’t going to be nearly as much fun as hanging out with the gang.

‘OK,’ he nodded. ‘I’m in. Lauren should be over there anyway and I wouldn’t mind seeing her for a bit.’

Marcus led the way towards the exit.

‘To the Batmobile,’ the grey-haired man shouted, taking a swig of rum from a hip flask that had appeared from inside his jacket moments after he’d drained the last of the wine.

As they stepped out into the chill air, Gabrielle was alarmed to see Marcus taking up the driver’s seat of the electric golf buggy she’d been using to shuttle him around campus.

‘Marcus,’ she said sternly. ‘I don’t think you’re in any fit state—’

Marcus broke into a big grin. ‘Hogwash, girl,’ he grinned. ‘I’ve been driving all my life and I’ve not had so much as a scrape. Come on, kids, climb aboard. Next stop the junior block. Have your fares ready to pay the conductor.’

‘Shotgun,’ James shouted, as he dived into the front passenger seat of the little buggy. Kyle, Bruce and Callum crammed themselves into the back, while Connor and Shakeel had to perch on the small cargo shelf with their

legs dangling over the rear of the vehicle.

Gabrielle placed a firm hand on Marcus' shoulder. 'Mr Thompson, I *really* don't think you should be driving.'

Marcus shot her a mischievous grin. 'I don't want to marry you any more, Gabrielle O'Brien. You're starting to sound just like all of my ex-wives.'

Marcus hit the accelerator and the overloaded buggy began whirring away without her.

'Frankly, I'd rather walk,' Gabrielle shouted bitterly after them. She couldn't believe the way Marcus had treated her after she'd spent half the day chaperoning him around campus.

The little buggies were good for thirty kilometres an hour, but not with seven passengers aboard. Marcus lurched the steering wheel sharply to the right as the buggy edged off the paved path on to the grass verge.

'Watch it, dude,' James yelled.

'I can hardly see where I'm going,' Marcus said, as he pulled back on to the path and began picking up speed.

'It might *help* if you turned the headlamps on,' James said. 'The switch is on your right, below the steering wheel.'

Much to James' alarm, Marcus took his eyes off the road and began looking for the switch. All six passengers simultaneously realised that Gabrielle had been right about their elderly pilot being in no state to drive.

James grabbed the steering wheel as the vehicle lurched off the road. Marcus flipped the headlamps on in time for James to see that they were going way too fast to make it

around a sharp bend less than twenty metres in front of them.

‘Oh my god,’ James shouted, wrapping his arms over his face as Marcus hit the brake pedal.

The braking did little to stop them careering off the path into one of the combed gravel beds at the front of the Dojo. There was a horrific grinding noise as the buggy ploughed into the loose stones, sending them firing off in all directions.

The battery cut out and the headlamps failed as the buggy nudged a low wall and ground to a halt. James heard the flying gravel settle and breathed a mouthful of dust as they were plunged back into darkness.

‘Is everybody OK?’ he gasped.

‘I think we’re gonna live,’ Kyle said dryly, as he clambered out the side of the buggy. ‘Just.’

Bruce and Connor had both fallen off the back when the buggy juddered over the gravel, but it only seemed to be pride that was hurt as they dusted themselves down.

Marcus Thompson began to giggle drunkenly. ‘You think I should have let young Gabrielle drive after all?’

Kyle whispered in James’ ear, ‘If I didn’t know the old soak was already dying, I’d kill him.’

7. GOODNIGHT SWEETHEART

By the time they'd hauled the golf buggy out of the gravel and reset the fuses to make it run again, James and his friends had missed Mary and Joseph setting off for Bethlehem and the little baby Jesus was almost out. All the seats were gone, so they had to stand up at the back of the hall.

'I can see the head,' a seven-year-old Joseph squawked from the gloomily lit stage at the front of the hall.

Mary yelled out in pain as an attentive shepherd mopped her brow.

'Come on, Mary, put your back into it.'

'I can see it,' Joseph screamed as he grabbed a plastic doll off the floor and launched it high above his head. 'It's a boy.'

'We're going to call it Jesus,' Mary said.

James went up on tiptoes and tried to spot Lauren in the

darkened hall. He whispered to Kyle, 'Can you see my sister anywhere?'

Kyle looked at his watch. 'It's gone nine and she looked pretty beat when we finished digging. Maybe she went to bed early.'

James nodded. 'I'll go check her room.'

He crept out of the hall and passed down a deserted corridor, knocking gently before sticking his head inside the door. The room was dark, but he could make out Lauren's outline rising and falling beneath her duvet. One arm dangled over the side of the bed and her fingertips touched the floor.

James stepped inside and stood watching his sister for a moment. He felt sorry for her, knowing that she faced five more weeks of digging, followed by the horrors of basic training. He wished there was a way he could take some of the burden off his sister, but he knew that the only thing he could do right now was let her sleep.

'Goodnight, sis,' James whispered as he backed out of the room.

At least he knew Lauren would be happy in the morning when she saw what he'd got her for Christmas.

The Switch

Callum and Connor are identical twins, starring in their
very own CHERUB story . . .

Wednesday, 10.37 a.m.

‘So what’s with you two?’ Maureen Evans asked.

As an assistant mission controller Maureen didn’t get her own office, but her boss Chloe was working in Devon and wouldn’t be back any time soon. The two fourteen-year-olds facing her across Chloe’s desk were identical twins. Fair haired, slim, not bad looking.

Callum had been dragged away from a training exercise. He’d left muddy boots at the door, but still had beads of sweat streaking down his face and dark patches under the arms of his navy CHERUB shirt. Connor had been taken out of maths class, so his hair was carefully spiked and he wasn’t stinking up the room.

Neither twin said a word.

‘I’ve got a mission,’ Maureen explained. ‘We’ll need to make a fast switch. I don’t care what your personal problems

are, I need to know if you can work together and I need the answer now.'

Connor broke the silence. 'My problem is that my brother is a selfish, lying dickhead.'

Callum swelled up in his seat. 'I'm a dickhead? You're just pissed off because you struck out as usual.'

'Just die,' Connor shouted. 'That girl was after me the whole time. You ripped me off.'

Maureen didn't understand and didn't particularly want to understand, but she needed the two lads for her mission. 'Why don't you both calm down and explain what happened?'

They spoke simultaneously:

'This cheating turd—'

'He's a total scumbag, you can't reason with him—'

Maureen took a breath, pointed at Connor and spoke firmly. 'You first.'

Connor glowered at his brother as he began to explain. 'We went to the bowling alley Saturday night. I got talking to this girl on the next lane. We were getting along great. Eating my nachos, joking about and stuff. But I offered to buy the girl a coke, then realised I didn't have any money. Tightwad here wouldn't lend me a cent—'

Callum interrupted. 'You *always* borrow money and never pay me back. You owe me about thirty quid.'

Connor stood up and yelped indignantly. 'I owe *you* money,' he gasped. 'You're the one who borrowed fifty euros when we were at summer hostel, and what about my

G-Star jeans that you've had for three months?'

Callum stood up and the twins went eyeball to eyeball. 'You said I could have those jeans, so don't give me that shit. And you wore my leather jacket for months and brought it back with the pocket hanging off.'

'Sit down,' Maureen shouted. She pointed at Callum. 'You can have your say when he's finished his story.'

The twins made identical sighs as they settled back into their chairs. Maureen smiled at how they sat forward with their ankles crossed: they acted the same even when they hated each other.

'Please continue your fascinating story, Connor,' Maureen said.

'Typical, take his side,' Callum moaned, as he slumped in the chair and tipped his head back.

'Callum wouldn't lend me shit, so I went off to find Mo, who was playing a few lanes over. Then I went off to get the cokes. There was a mega queue, so I was gone for ages and when I get back this piece of work is sitting with my girl, hands up her shirt and tongue down her neck.'

Maureen stifled a smile.

'She thought you'd ditched her,' Callum explained. 'I just wandered over and she started being really friendly.'

'She thought you were me,' Connor yelled, standing up again. 'Don't act all innocent. You saw me chatting her up for over half an hour. What you did was low and doing it to your own twin was lower than low.'

The boys were out of their seats again. Connor bunched

his fist, but Callum got the first punch in, going for the head but only managing to glance his brother across the shoulder. As Connor stumbled backwards and tripped over his chair, Maureen threw herself into harm's way and got caught painfully in the thigh by Callum's swinging boot.

'Pack it in,' she yelled.

The twins both looked shocked. Kicking a member of CHERUB staff, even if you weren't aiming at her, could land you in serious trouble. The pain made Maureen furious as she hobbled backwards towards the desk, but she needed the boys working together on a mission, not running punishment laps.

'Right,' Maureen yelled, wagging an index finger fitted with two huge gold rings. 'You boys now have two choices. First choice: I march you over to Zara's office, tell her what just happened here and you two will find yourself in very deep doo-doo.'

'What did I do?' Connor shouted indignantly. 'Callum booted you.'

'Shut your mouth,' Maureen yelled, as she gave Connor her sternest don't mess with me face. 'I'll make sure there's plenty of trouble for both of you,' she explained. 'Your second choice is to sit back in those chairs, agree to take the mission, you act nicey nice for the next twenty-four hours and we forget this incident ever happened.'

'I'm not making up with that penis,' Callum said. 'I'd sooner run a thousand punishment laps.'

'You don't have to make up,' Maureen said. 'As far as

I'm concerned, you can duel to the death with rusty hooks as soon as my little mission's over.'

The twins shot daggers at one another as they reluctantly settled back into their chairs.

'So what's this mission then?' Connor asked.

12.10 p.m.

Steve Nolan lived in a warehouse apartment in London's trendy Primrose Hill. Skylights, big sofas and Andy Warhol on the walls. Born in Melbourne, he'd set up a jewellery manufacturing business after dropping out of art school. He was a well-known face on the London fashion scene and his wedding rings had graced film stars and pop idols.

It was almost noon, but Steve had been out clubbing the night before and was just out of bed, coming down his spiral stairs in a striped Paul Smith dressing gown. The plan was to slide a pod into the coffee machine and drink strong black coffee while he checked e-mails on his laptop.

'Nice dog,' McEwen shouted.

Steve shot into the air with fright as he saw the burly man in workman's boots and paint-spattered trackie bottoms sitting on his leather couch stroking a minuscule poodle.

'Who the bloody hell are you?' Steve demanded with a slight Aussie accent, as he lunged for a cordless handset. 'Get out or I'll call the police.'

'Touch that phone and I'll cook Sooki in your

microwave,' McEwen said matter of factly.

As McEwen stood up the tiny dog rolled into a gap between two sofa cushions and got her back legs trapped. Despite his threat, McEwen cupped his hand under Sooki's belly and lifted her up. She yelped twice before clattering across the slate floor towards her master.

'I don't keep any jewellery here,' Steve said nervously, as McEwen approached. 'And I know Karate.'

McEwen stopped walking as Steve ducked into a fighting stance and made a high-pitched yelp before throwing a punch. McEwen raised one eyebrow as he intercepted the fist and began crushing Steve's knuckles inside his massive hand.

'Oww, oww! Oh my god, that *really* hurts!'

'If I let you go will you cut the Karate nonsense?'

'Bloody hell,' Steve whined. 'Christ, you brute!'

McEwen pushed Steve towards a chromed bar stool. 'Sit on there. I'm not here to rob or rape you. Just calm down and shut your face.'

'This is my home, how dare you!' Steve said, rubbing his injured knuckles as he propped himself on the stool.

'Which part of *shut your face* didn't you understand? And do your robe up, I can see more of you than I really want to.'

Steve looked furious as he pulled the robe across his lap and tied the belt.

'My name is Jake McEwen. I work for British Intelligence. I called your office, but the girl there said you were at home.'

But you didn't answer the door, so I popped the French window and waited while you sang in the shower.'

'You look more like a bricklayer than James Bond,' Steve said.

'Dress like a builder and you get away with all kinds of suspicious noises,' McEwen explained.

'Do you have some kind of identification?'

McEwen smiled as he flashed a plastic card with his photo on. 'Ever seen one of these before?'

'You could have made that in a copy shop.'

'Could have,' McEwen said. 'So for now, either believe or don't believe the spy bit. The important thing to understand is that if you don't listen very carefully to what I'm about to tell you, the next thing I squeeze won't be your knuckles, OK?'

Steve hastily crossed his legs. 'So what does British Intelligence want with a jeweller?' he asked.

'There's a couple of South American diplomats going around London hawking dodgy diamonds - the kind that are illegally mined and sold in violation of a United Nations trade embargo. We need to get into their offices and plant some bugs, but our suspect is working out of the most secure part of the embassy.'

'And what am I supposed to do about that, your spyness?'

'You can get close to these people: you're well known as a man who buys large uncut diamonds and it's been in the newspapers that your company is having financial problems.'

Steve shook his head resolutely. 'I have a personal

reputation to protect. If I was seen to be involved with shady characters . . . And frankly, I'd have been more inclined to help if you'd approached me in a civilised manner.'

McEwen pulled a letter out of his pocket and showed it to Steve long enough for him to see that it came from *Inland Revenue – Tax Fraud Department*.

'We need you on board quickly because we only just received the information and we've got to act fast. If you agree to cooperate, my people will be prepared to make this little tax problem of yours go away.'

Steve shook his head. 'I don't have a tax problem.'

McEwen smiled as he read an extract from the letter:

'The informant Miss T told the revenue that Mr Steve Nolan of Nolan's Jewellers has been siphoning money from sales in the United States into a private account. Pieces of jewellery worth in excess of £2.4 million were allegedly donated to film and television personalities in the United States for promotional purposes. Miss T stated that the items were actually sold by a Cayman Island-based company owned by Steve Nolan and his sister Emily, and provided us with account numbers and transaction dates.'

McEwen passed the letter across to Steve.

'That's serious seven-figure tax evasion,' McEwen explained. 'Now I ain't no lawyer, but I hear you've already been a naughty boy and had a slap on the wrist from the taxman. If they prosecute you again, it'll be slammer time. And I don't think your refined and delicate self would really fit too well inside Wormwood Scrubs.'

Steve's worried eyes turned angry as he worked out who the informant was. 'I can't believe that bitch dobbed me in,' he hissed. 'I paid her bloody wages while she had two ugly-arsed sprogs.'

'So the deal's simple, Mr Nolan,' McEwen said, not responding to Steve's emotional state. 'If you help us deal with this little piece of business, we'll make sure that any investigation vanishes in a puff of fairy dust.'

McEwen paused to glance at his watch. 'We've got until this evening. Call your lawyer, we'll draw up legal papers giving you immunity from prosecution for tax evasion, provided you help us out. Do we have a deal, Mr Nolan?'

Nolan looked down at his lap and made a long sigh before answering. 'I suppose we do.'

'Great,' McEwen said, smiling. 'And you'd better call someone to fix your French doors too. I kind of wrenched 'em off their tracks when I broke in.'

9.24 p.m.

The Lymeric Hotel was a shabby two-star near London's Russell Square. The corridors thronged with French and Japanese school kids having the time of their lives.

Callum and Connor were definitely not having the time of their lives. They sat together at the end of a double bed, stripped down to grey school socks and matching blue undershorts. They had a large modelling light shining in their faces and the bedspread and carpet around Callum's feet were covered in clumps of freshly chopped hair.

‘What do you think?’ Lucy asked.

Lucy was an MI5 technical officer. Her speciality was concealment and disguise. She could open up a Reebok and hide a microphone in the heel, give you a new jaw line, or stick on a mole that was actually a high definition camera.

Even identical twins aren’t exactly the same and Lucy’s job was to iron out the differences between Callum and Connor. CHERUB didn’t have its own cosmetic specialist, so she’d worked with the twins on several occasions. Usually they had a bit of a laugh, but this time it was strictly business.

‘That’s the hair done,’ Lucy told Maureen, who sat at a desk nearby. ‘What do you think?’

‘They’re like two peas in a pod,’ Maureen replied. ‘Surly, miserable, teenaged peas.’

‘With zits,’ Lucy laughed, as the twins remained determinedly silent. ‘They were so much easier to match up before they started getting hormones.’

Lucy took out a powerful LED torch and moved it methodically over Callum’s skin. He had a couple of bright red zits on his neck that would hopefully be covered up by the collar of his shirt. Connor had a more visible zit on his right nostril, and Lucy got to work with her make-up bag, toning down Connor’s zit with concealing cream and painting a red patch on to Callum so that the boys looked identical.

‘Stand up straight,’ Lucy ordered. ‘Shoulders touching.’

When the twins stood level Lucy carefully eyed the top of their heads. ‘You’re catching up, Callum,’ she said. ‘But

you're still about ten millimetres shorter than your brother. I'll give you a lift to put inside your shoes.'

'Nobody will notice,' Callum moaned.

'It's only a tiny difference, but twenty tiny differences are enough to make someone suspicious, as you well know.'

'Do you ever get them mixed up?' Maureen asked.

Lucy laughed. 'I've spent enough time staring at these two under bright lights and magnifying glasses to know every blemish. But the easiest way to tell them apart is Connor's nose. It tilts slightly to the right if you look carefully.'

Maureen stood up and looked as Lucy pointed out the difference. 'So it does,' she said.

'That's where our mum lost it and smashed my face against a tabletop,' Connor explained.

The twins rarely spoke about their early years, but they'd been taken into care aged seven and their mother had spent eighteen months in prison for abusing them. This awkward truth hung in the air until Lucy broke it by giving Connor a gentle prod in the buttock with the pointed end of a plastic comb.

'You're done,' she announced.

'That was sexual harassment,' Connor moaned. 'I'm suing!'

'Sexual harassment, you wish,' Lucy said, as she poked him again. 'Don't wash off your make-up, sleep on your backs. If anything calamitous happens, you can call my mobile number. But I live in Sevenoaks and I've been on

duty all day, so please try not to.'

Callum and Connor both thought Lucy was sexy and laughed, until they caught themselves smiling at each other and went back to being miserable. The two boys turned towards matching sets of school uniform lying across the bed, along with matching shoes and two backpacks with cricket bats sticking out of them.

As Lucy packed her make-up bag into a wheeled case, Callum started getting dressed. When he was done, Maureen took a photograph of how he looked, while Connor made sure that his tie was knotted at the same length as his brother's.

'Did you put the lifts in your shoes?' Connor asked.

He didn't sound nasty, but it was designed to needle his brother about being a few millimetres shorter.

'Of course I did,' Callum said acidly. 'I'm not a moron.'

'I wouldn't go as far as that,' Connor said.

Maureen sensed another row brewing and stood up. 'You know boys, I heard that they're looking for a couple of lads to scrape the sludge out of two hundred metres of guttering around the mission control building. Would you like me to volunteer you?'

The twins got the message and shut up.

Thursday, 4.17 a.m.

The embassy was in a grand terrace close to Regent's Park. A black people-carrier stopped two doors away and Callum and McEwen stepped out into a drizzly summer morning.

The pair had green boiler suits with the name of a heating engineering company zipped over their clothes and McEwen carried a large metal toolbox and a long policeman's torch. They walked up six steps and a security guard opened the door before they could buzz the intercom.

'Are you familiar with the protocol?' the guard asked, as he led them up thickly carpeted stairs, with chandeliers hanging overhead.

'Just about,' McEwen said. 'But remind me anyway.'

The guard wore the uniform of a regular security company, but was actually an MI5 operative. 'We've had a technical crew working up here for the last two nights making your access point. Of course, it goes without saying that there might be a major diplomatic incident if you were caught.'

'We'll do our best not to be,' McEwen said, smiling cheekily. 'I promise.'

'I got picked for tonight's assignment because I worked with a CHERUB agent many years ago,' the guard said. 'Lovely girl named Amy Collins. She was only eleven, but my god did she know her stuff. I often wonder what became of her.'

'Better not to ask,' McEwen said gruffly. 'You know how it is.'

'She's not at CHERUB any more,' Callum said. 'She's in her twenties now.'

McEwen flicked Callum's ear and told him to shut his mouth. The guard looked at Callum guiltily but didn't say

anything more until they reached the third floor and crossed a meeting room fitted with a long oak table.

‘The shaft is only about two metres long and leads to a ventilation grille inside the embassy,’ the guard explained. ‘I’ve been up there and cleaned out every speck of dirt so that you don’t spoil your clothes. The office workers will start arriving here in a couple of hours, but I’ll lock this room and nobody will come inside.’

The guard reached up and pulled a large picture off the wall, revealing a crude plasterboard hatch directly behind it. Callum looked inside, and could see the embassy’s polished wooden floor through the grille about half a metre above his head.

‘You can make tea or coffee, there’s biscuits,’ the guard continued. ‘If you need to urinate there’s a flask, and I think that’s everything. I’ll give you a call when I see Steve Nolan arriving at the embassy.’

‘All sounds good to me,’ McEwen said. ‘We stopped to pick up newspapers and some breakfast on the way in, so we’ll just squat here until show time.’

7.22 a.m.

Connor liked a good blast in the shower when he woke up in the morning, but he couldn’t go near water because of the make-up job and he felt grotty as he met with Steve Nolan in the hotel lobby.

‘So you’re my new nephew,’ Steve said airily. ‘How lovely to meet you.’

Maureen didn't like Steve's tone and spoke sharply. 'Concentrate on what you've been taught, Mr Nolan. Remember, you only earn your get-out-of-jail-free card if this all comes off perfectly. Have you got any questions?'

'Is there anywhere around here where I could get a smoked salmon and cream cheese bagel?' Steve asked. 'I'm not used to being up this early and I don't want to start feeling queasy.'

Maureen was slightly irritated by the request, but Steve was going undercover with no training and she had to do everything she could to keep him calm. They re-routed their driver so that they passed a branch of Bagel Factory and Steve satisfied his craving as they took the fifteen-minute drive to Regent's Park.

The embassy was regarded as a likely terrorist target. Concrete bollards protected it from car bombs and a miserable police officer stood by the main door, looking damp. The lobby had a mahogany reception desk and walls decorated with Aztec shields.

The rugged-looking suspect introduced himself as Ramiro and was surprised to see Connor.

'Last-minute thing,' Steve explained. 'My brother's away on business and this little fella has a habit of not making it to school if you don't watch him walk through the gate.'

Ramiro laughed. 'The same in my country,' he said. 'My daughter at school is very good. My son's not so much. It's not a manly thing to study hard. Now, if you don't mind.'

They'd crossed a small marble hallway, but the main

part of the embassy building was behind an airport-style security checkpoint. An embassy guard stood up as Connor and Steve placed their backpacks on the conveyor belt. When he was satisfied with their bags, he spoke in bad English, ordering them to remove their belts and shoes and turn out their pockets before passing through a metal detector.

‘I’m sorry about this,’ Ramiro said. ‘But there are drug wars and terrorists in my country. We must do this to everyone.’

‘Not a problem,’ Steve said politely, as he pushed his feet back inside his shoes.

The guard was less friendly. He swivelled the LCD display from the X-ray machine towards Steve and tapped accusingly on the outline of a dark purple contraption.

‘What is this?’

‘Weighing scales and an optical magnifier.’

‘What for?’

Ramiro broke into a broad smile. ‘Sergeant, Mr Nolan is my guest.’

The guard turned sharply towards Ramiro. ‘You do your job and I do mine. You either get clearance from the ambassador, or your friends pass through security the same as everyone else.’

‘It’s not a problem at all,’ Steve said, as he unzipped his pack. ‘Look all you like.’

The guard seemed to consider this for a few seconds before giving a wave. ‘Take it through.’

Connor saw an exchange of nasty looks between Ramiro and the guard as he stuffed everything back into his pockets. He reckoned the guard knew Ramiro was up to something dodgy. But was he an honest man who'd seen one too many sets of gemstone scales on his X-ray machine, or was he just looking for a cut of Ramiro's profits?

Not that it mattered right now. According to another diamond merchant to whom Ramiro had tried selling his haul of illegal diamonds, he met clients in a third-floor office. If he was taking them to a different part of the embassy their whole plan was completely down the toilet.

Connor tensed up as they entered a tiny lift, with barely room for the three of them. He felt some relief when Ramiro pressed the button for the third floor, but he was now seconds away from the trickiest part of the operation.

As the elderly lift clattered upwards, Connor reached into the pocket of his school blazer and wrapped his hand around a cricket ball. He made sure he was last out of the lift and as Ramiro and Steve turned left and started walking, he dropped the leather ball, making sure that it ran backwards down the corridor.

Ramiro heard the crack on the floorboards and turned back to see Connor jogging down the hallway after his ball. Steve yelled at his fake nephew, before tugging on Ramiro's suit to hurry him along

'I don't mean to be rude but I've got so much on this morning,' Steve said.

Connor trailed the ball down the hallway to a spot

partially obscured by a structural column and a leather sofa. He'd been told that there were no security cameras in these private areas of the embassy, but he still felt paranoid as he picked up the cricket ball and tapped it twice against the wall. Almost instantly, a metal ventilation grille behind the sofa opened and Callum emerged.

The twins eyed each other briefly.

'Good luck,' Connor said half-heartedly, as he passed the cricket ball to his brother.

Callum pocketed the cricket ball and began jogging towards Ramiro and Steve, as Connor crouched behind the sofa and disappeared through the grille. The switch had taken less than ten seconds. Callum was dressed identically to Connor, but Lucy had fitted him with a tiny earpiece, he had a microphone in the cuff of his blazer and a backpack filled with surveillance equipment.

'Butterfingers,' Callum told Steve, which sounded innocent but was actually a codeword telling him that they'd switched successfully. A moment later, Callum passed Steve a bunch of keys.

'I meant to hand your keys back when we left the house.'

'No worries,' Steve said cheerfully. 'I hadn't forgotten them.'

They'd worried that Steve seemed highly strung, but he was keeping his cool. Ramiro looked at Callum, then turned away and used his embassy pass to go through a set of double doors into a grandly furnished waiting area.

There was a table covered in old magazines and a

receptionist's desk, but Ramiro always arranged his illicit meetings either before the receptionist arrived or after she went home.

'Wait out here,' Steve told Callum. 'It won't take long. You won't be late for school.'

As Steve went into Ramiro's office, Callum unzipped the backpack, revealing three boxes of tricks. The first was gun-shaped and filled with tiny microfilament listening devices that could be fired into carpets, cushions or seats. However, these would only pick up sounds in the reception area and all the important meetings took place in Ramiro's office. Fortunately the latest generation of laser microphones was capable of turning the most minuscule of vibrations into audible sounds. The only problem was, the invisible laser beams had to be pointed at a large flat surface like a door or window, which meant they couldn't be hidden out of view like a normal bug.

Callum picked a spot on the side of the secretary's desk, removed a sticky pad no bigger than the nail on his little toe and stuck it on. He then placed another on the far wall, in a shadow under an oil painting. He raised his blazer cuff up to his mouth.

'McEwen do you copy?' Callum whispered.

'Copy,' McEwen said, his voice coming through a tiny invisible earpiece in Callum's ear.

'Laser mics one and two are in position. Can you calibrate the beams and signal check?'

'Will do.'

Calibrating the laser microphones involved aiming the tiny laser beams across the room until they found the point on Ramiro's office door where they got the strongest signal. While Callum waited for a response, he moved around the room firing a dozen microfilament bugs into chair cushions.

McEwen sounded happy when he came back through the earpiece. 'I'm listening to Steve and Ramiro loud and clear. Signal is strong, no need to put in a signal booster.'

Callum raised his wrist up to his mouth. 'Cool.'

'Job done,' McEwen said. 'Pick up a magazine and wait for Steve to come out.'

Callum allowed himself a satisfied smile as a busty secretary came into the room.

'Who are you?' she demanded, as she took off a damp raincoat.

'I'm just waiting for my dad to come out of a meeting,' Callum explained, pointing towards Ramiro's door.

He instantly realised that he should have said uncle, but it wasn't the end of the world. By the time the secretary sat down, Steve and Ramiro were coming out of the office with huge grins on their faces. Ramiro's smile only lasted until he saw his secretary.

'You're early,' Ramiro said.

'So are you,' she replied curtly.

They took the stairs back down to the lobby. The security guard pressed a button to let them through an exit gate and Ramiro gave Steve a quick wave as he walked back towards the lift.

‘Did you do it?’ Callum asked, as the driver pulled out into traffic.

‘Uncle Steve was a good little spy,’ Steve nodded, as he handed the bunch of keys back to Callum. ‘I didn’t touch every stone, but I rubbed my hands on the key fob like I was told.’

‘It’s a chemical marker,’ Callum explained. ‘Anyone who touches those diamonds now will become contaminated with minute quantities of a complex man-made carbon molecule. It just looks like dust through a regular microscope. Don’t forget to give your hands a good wash before eating anything.’

‘Is it toxic?’ Steve asked, giving his slender fingers a look of concern.

‘It won’t kill you,’ Callum said. ‘But it won’t do you much good either.’

‘I bought three stones,’ Steve said. ‘They’re absolutely *fantastic* quality. One is completely flawless. You’d pay ten times the price at an official diamond auction.’

‘Good for you, I guess,’ Callum replied. ‘Not so good for the poor kid who’s up to his knees in mud in an illegal diamond mine, with some corrupt general threatening to shoot him in the head if he doesn’t work harder.’

Epilogue

The bugs planted in the embassy eventually led to the arrest of RAMIRO along with seventeen of his associates and five diamond dealers distributing illegal stones in London and Amsterdam. Ramiro was able to return home due to his diplomatic status and did not face prosecution in his own country due to close personal ties with the president. Members of the smuggling racket without such powerful connections received prison sentences ranging between three and seven years.

Despite being given a break by CHERUB and MI5, Steve Nolan's jewellery business went bankrupt in early 2009. He can now be seen on TV's ShopMax channel, selling his own line of jewellery. All of this new range is made with artificial diamonds.

The girl CALLUM and CONNOR met at the bowling alley found out that they were twins and assumed that

they'd played a trick on her. She called them both perverts and threatened to slap them if they ever came near her again.

The twins got back on speaking terms a couple of weeks later.

CHERUB

Character Profiles

NAME: James Adams

BORN: 1991 Tufnell Park, London

BIRTH NAME: James Choke

APPEARANCE: Fair hair, blue eyes, stocky build

FAMILY:

Mother - Died of heart failure, London, 2003.

Father - Unknown.

Sister - Lauren Adams.

JOINED CHERUB: 2003

James Adams is a highly capable, though disruptive, member of CHERUB. His prowess at mathematics is commonly noted and he has an IQ of 153. He has shown reasonable aptitude in Karate and Judo classes, although his reflexes are not the fastest and he often struggles against nimbler opponents. Although generally an outstanding agent James is stocky, which makes him strong but also prone to weight gain. He has had a number of girlfriends since joining CHERUB, including Joanna Ribble, April Moore, Kerry Chang and Dana Smith. James has a rocky, but largely stable, relationship with his sister Lauren.

- 'James is basically a nice kid, but he tends to go off the rails if you don't keep a close eye on him.' **Meryl Spencer, handler**
- 'I love my brother, but he's dead moody and sometimes I just want to punch his lights out.' **Lauren Adams, sister**
- 'Sometimes when you see James hanging around with his mates you'd think he was just an ordinary teenager. You don't realise what he's really capable of until he's working under pressure on a mission.' **John Jones, mission controller**

WE ASKED JAMES: If you were a biscuit, what type would it be?

JAMES SAID: Definitely a Jaffa Cake!

NAME: Lauren Adams

BORN: 1994 Tufnell Park, London

BIRTH NAME: Lauren Zoe Onions

APPEARANCE: Fair hair, blue eyes, athletic build

FAMILY:

Mother – Died of heart failure, London, 2003.

Father – Ronald Onions, detailed at H.M. Prison Longmark.

Brother – James Adams.

JOINED CHERUB: 2003

Lauren Adams has an IQ of 147, and her capabilities are well rounded – she is fluent in Spanish and Russian, and she has demonstrated her quick-wittedness on a number of missions (check out *Divine Madness* where Lauren rescues a room full of toddlers). She is one of the youngest CHERUB agents to have been awarded her black T-shirt for outstanding performance and bravery on a mission.

Like her brother, James, Lauren has a tendency to allow emotions to overwhelm reason – she failed her first attempt at basic training after hitting training instructor Norman Large over the head with a spade. Lauren has great speed and upper body strength and her ability to defeat more experienced opponents in the dojo has put several noses out of joint (and broken in one case!).

- ‘Lauren Adams is a vile subhuman splat of puke who deserves to be booted off CHERUB campus.’
Norman Large, training instructor
- ‘I wish she’d stop messing about with my bloody phone.’ **James Adams, brother**

WE ASKED LAUREN: What are you planning to do once you leave CHERUB?

LAUREN SAID: I guess my fantasy job would be lead singer in a rock band, but I don’t play an instrument and I can’t sing to save my life!

NAME: Kyle Blueman

BORN: 1989 United Kingdom, exact location unknown

BIRTH NAME: Unknown

APPEARANCE: Dark hair and eyes. Medium slim build and small for his age

FAMILY:

Kyle was abandoned shortly after his birth. His mother was never traced and he spent his first seven years being raised by a succession of foster parents in the South West of England.

JOINED CHERUB: 1997

Kyle is a highly capable member of CHERUB, one of the few CHERUB agents to have studied Thai kick-boxing, and also proficient in Judo and Karate. He is James Adams' best friend. A taste for practical jokes gives Kyle a reputation for being disruptive, and has led to him being overlooked for more advanced missions.

Kyle gets his first boyfriend in *Man vs Beast*, during which mission he attained black-shirt status. Despite excelling in all academic areas, Kyle has launched a successful pirate DVD business to fund parties with his fellow cherubs.

- 'Kyle is one of the few boys on campus whose bedroom isn't a public health hazard.' **Meryl Spencer, handler**
- 'His CHERUB career has been a good one, but it could have been spectacular. Sadly, Kyle has spent a lot of time restricted to simple missions or suspended from missions due to bad behaviour and silly errors of judgement.' **Dr Terrence McAfferty**

WE ASKED KYLE: Do you like turnips?

KYLE SAID: Err . . . no.

NAME: Kerry Chang

BORN: 1992 Hong Kong or China

BIRTH NAME: Ling Chang

APPEARANCE: Oriental, straight dark hair and brown eyes

FAMILY:

Kerry was found wandering the streets of Hong Kong in 1995. It is suspected that her family was one of many killed in a large apartment-block fire.

JOINED CHERUB: 1998

Kerry Chang is a bright agent, though she prefers verbal and artistic subjects to maths and sciences. She also has a gift for languages and is fluent in Spanish, French, Japanese and Mandarin. Her relationship with James Adams began in basic training when they were partnered together. Kerry is also known for her talent at martial arts and has won numerous Karate trophies on campus, though she has suffered a severe knee injury that may need further corrective surgery as she grows.

- 'If every kid was as well-behaved as Kerry I'd probably be out of a job!' **Meryl Spencer, handler**
- 'Kerry might not be the hottest girl in the world, but she's not half bad and she's great fun to be with.'
James Adams
- 'My favourite thing about Kerry is that she doesn't take any crap from anyone.'
Lauren Adams

KERRY LIKES: Soap operas, Chinese food, playing football.

KERRY HATES: Soggy bread, knee operations, watching football.

NAMES: Callum and Connor Reilly

BORN: 1993, Croydon, Surrey (identical twins)

BIRTH NAMES: Callum and Connor Farnworth

APPEARANCE: Fair hair, blue eyes, slim build

FAMILY:

The twins were taken into care in 1997. They had suffered abuse at the hands of their mother, who was barred from all contact with her sons. Callum and Connor barely spoke until they were seven years old.

JOINED CHERUB: 2003

Callum and Connor Reilly are excellent long distance runners. Twins are particularly valuable CHERUB agents because of their potential in intelligence operations, and the twins' enthusiasm for languages and genuine appetite for learning led to both boys becoming excellent agents.

- 'Callum and Connor must stop mucking about and pretending to be one another. Their special operations training did not help with this.' Meryl Spencer, handler

CALLUM AND CONNOR LIKE: Reading, athletics, watching movies.

CALLUM AND CONNOR HATE: Being mistaken for each other.

NAME: Bruce Norris

BORN: 1992 Prestatyn, Wales

BIRTH NAME: Aled Thomas

APPEARANCE: Dark hair and eyes, slight build

FAMILY:

Mother – Died of blood poisoning hours after Bruce was born.

Father – Died in a building site accident when Bruce was a toddler.

JOINED CHERUB: 1998

Bruce's strength and excellent stamina are attested to by his brilliance in martial arts. Though not exceptional by CHERUB standards, his language skills are useful on missions and his commitment to friends has been demonstrated over his years as a qualified agent. Notable for his obsession with nunchakus and violence, Bruce once dislocated James Adams' right thumb in a sparring match.

- 'Bruce is a genuine eccentric. One day he'll be studying an obscure Japanese martial text like a scholar, the next he'll burst into tears over an event you'd expect a child half his age to brush off lightly.'

Meryl Spencer, handler

- 'Whatever you do, don't pick a fight with Bruce.'

Kyle Blueman

- 'Don't assume Bruce is the toughest kid on campus. I once broke his leg in eight places and I would happily do so again.'

Kerry Chang

WE ASKED BRUCE: Do you ever get the urge to punch James in the face?

BRUCE SAID: Yes, about three times a day!

NAME: Zara Asker (staff)

BORN: 1970 Telford, Shropshire

BIRTH NAME: Jacqueline Oxford

FAMILY:

Zara's parents were TV documentary makers who died in a plane crash over the Amazon when Zara was a toddler. She was looked after by her grandfather until he died of a heart attack in 1977.

CURRENT STATUS: Chairwoman

After joining CHERUB at the age of eight, Zara quickly established a reputation as an excellent and versatile agent. She retired after 14 successful missions and went on to study International Politics at Yale University in Connecticut, USA. After a stint working for the United Nations and involvement in various peacekeeping missions, Zara returned to CHERUB in 1996 as an assistant mission controller.

She became senior mission controller in 2003, and rose to become Chairwoman at the end of *Man vs Beast*. Zara is known for her motherly but firm attitude towards agents and demonstrated her skill in *Class A* where she played the role of James, Kyle, Kerry and Nicole's mother. She is married to Ewart Asker, a CHERUB mission controller.

- 'Easily my favourite member of the CHERUB staff.'
James Adams
- 'Zara is well liked and thoroughly deserved being appointed as my successor.'
Dr Terrence McAfferty
(former CHERUB chairman)

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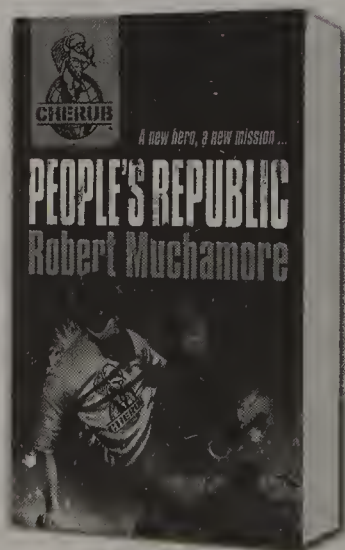
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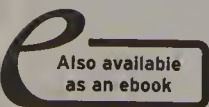
PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC

Robert Muchamore

Twelve-year-old Ryao is CHERUB's newest recruit. He's got his first mission: infiltrating the billion-dollar Aramov criminal empire. But he's got no idea that this routine job will lead him into an explosive adventure involving drug smugglers, illegal immigrants and human trafficking, or that his first mission will turn into one of the biggest in CHERUB's history.



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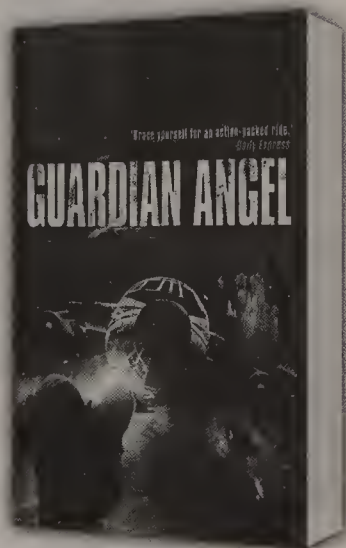




GUARDIAN ANGEL

Robert Muchamore

Ryan has saved Ethan's life more than once. Ethan thinks he must be a guardian angel. But Ryan works for CHERUB, a secret organisation with one key advantage: even experienced criminals never suspect that children are spying on them. Ethan's family runs a billion-dollar criminal empire and Ryan's job is to destroy it. Can Ryan complete his mission without destroying Ethan as well?



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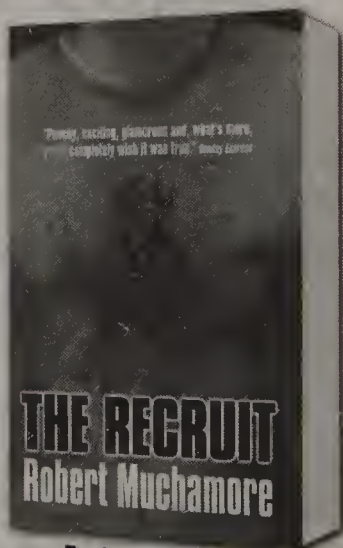
THE RECRUIT

Robert Muchamore

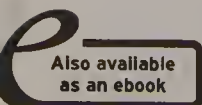
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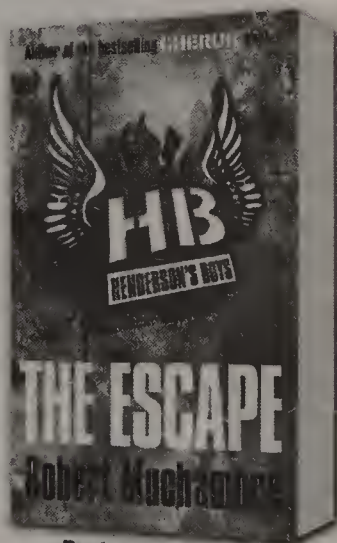


THE ESCAPE

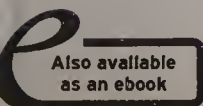
Robert Muchamore

Hitler's army is advancing towards Paris, and amidst the chaos, two British children are being hunted by German agents. British spy Charles Henderson tries to reach them first, but he can only do it with the help of a twelve-year-old French orphan.

The British secret service is about to discover that kids working undercover will help to win the war.



Book 1 — OUT NOW

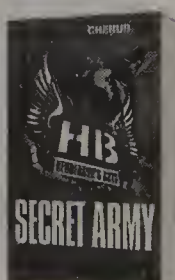
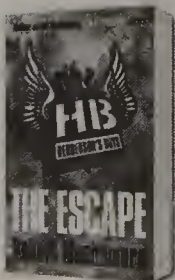
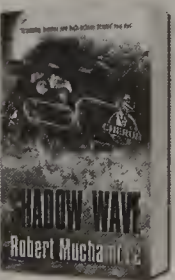
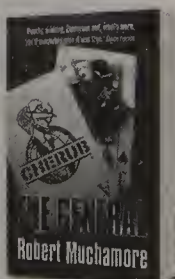
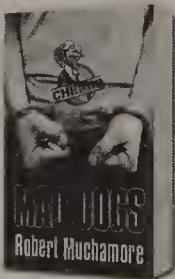
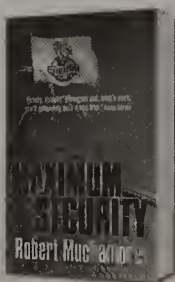


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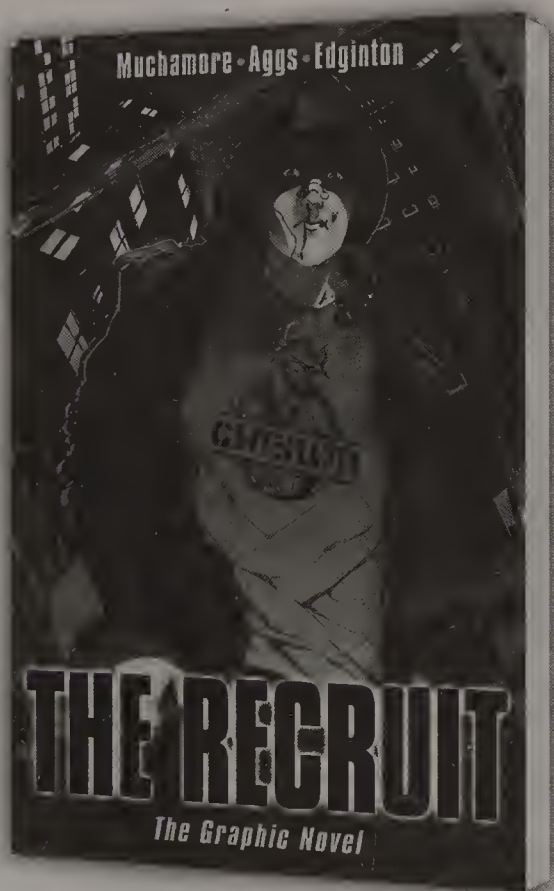
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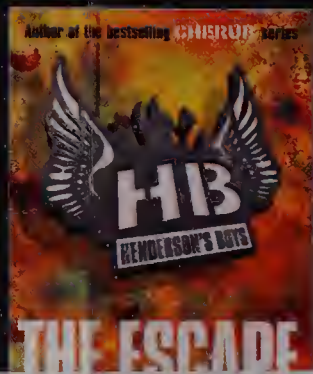


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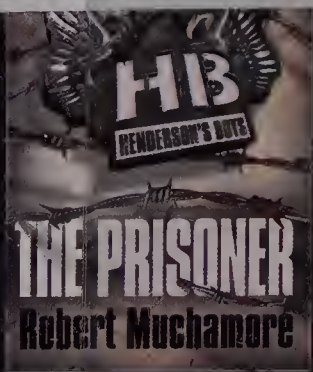
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